

The Middle East has been a key battleground for competing US and Russian interests since the old Cold war, with the region still serving as a major frontline in an ongoing global confrontation.

In recent years, however, there is a new driver behind the long-time rivals' competing Middle East policies: an assertive Christian conservatism which is at the heart of both Russian and US power.

Observers say the Kremlin has used the Orthodox church to project its own power across the region, while the Russian church has given its blessing to Russian military intervention in Syria and elsewhere.

President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church's (ROC) relations have never been stronger, with the church blessing Moscow's intervention in Syria as a "holy war" and at one point describing Putin's election as a "miracle from God."

In return, Putin has given support to the ROC's conservative, "traditional family values" agenda, as it seeks to take on Western liberalism and ideas of universal human rights, concepts that Putin's administration also views as anathema.

“There was a very high divorce rate and demographic decline in Russia after years of Soviet atheist rule,” said Kristina Stoeckl from the Department of Sociology at Innsbruck University. “So the church and government officials became attracted to patriarchal models of the family that contrasted with the communist era.”

Such models include opposition to abortion, divorce and gender equality, as well as LGBT+ rights.

At the same time, evangelical Christians are in positions of power in the US President Donald Trump’s administration and are key to his re-election bid. Many of them, too, are fighting a “culture war” against the same set of values, both at home and abroad.

This powerful evangelical lobby and the ROC are now also key to US and Russian interventions in one of the most volatile regions on earth: Israel and Palestine. Yet it will arguably be the region’s indigenous Christians who end up paying the highest price for this new religious zeal.



Russian President Vladimir Putin during a thanksgiving prayer service at the Kremlin Annunciation Cathedral in 2018. Photo: AFP via Sputnik/Alexei Druzhinin

These indigenous orthodox, Latin, Armenian and Coptic churches – which go back to the origins of Christianity itself – are often small minorities who have long had to strike a careful balance with their majority Muslim Middle Eastern neighbors. And being too closely associated with external “Christian” countries can have dire consequences.

“For a long time, Christians in the Middle East have been seen as a fifth column for international powers,” says Jocelyne Cesari, Senior Fellow at the Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University. “This is so destructive, none of them want to be seen like that again.”

Christians in Israel’s Holy Land seem to agree, particularly when it comes to US evangelical meddling that critics and observers say has shaped Trump’s strongly pro-Israel policy trajectory and dashed

any hope of a negotiated path to brokering peace with the Palestinians.

“For us, Palestinians in conflict with an Israel supported by the US government, and with the US government supported by extreme evangelicals, it makes it really hard for Christians living here in a Muslim majority country,” said Najeh Abu Shamsiyeh, Project Manager at the Arab Evangelical Episcopal School in Ramallah.

“These American evangelicals are more dramatically, fanatically, pro-Israeli than many Israelis themselves,” he told Asia Times.

Central to the Kremlin’s newfound conservative religious sympathy is the close bond between Putin, who has been trying to restore Russia’s former global glory, and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the country’s most powerful man of the cloth.

Since 2009, Kirill has been head of the ROC, which has around 90 million adherents, mostly in Russia, making it the world’s largest orthodox church.

Since Cold War times, the ROC has maintained links with the Middle East via the Christian Orthodox patriarchates of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch.

Orthodox Christians in Israel and Palestine come under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, while Alexandria has jurisdiction over Africa. Those in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and most of the Gulf come under Antioch, which is based in Damascus.



A priest leads prayers during the funeral of Father Joseph Hanna Ibrahim and his father at the Saint Joseph Church in the Syrian Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli, November 12, 2019.
Photo: AFP/Delil Souleiman

“While these are very small churches,” said Lucian Leustean, Reader in Politics and International Relations at Aston University in the UK, “they are very important in the Orthodox Church hierarchy, as they are the oldest.

“Having close relations with them helps the ROC establish itself as a leader of world orthodoxy. It also helps them gain a foothold in many Middle Eastern and African countries,” he said.

Indeed, these connections have also proved useful for the Kremlin and Putin, as the latter has sought to re-establish Russia’s global influence. “The Russian state has been able to use these ROC links for diplomatic purposes,” said Cesari.

These connections paid off in 2015 when Putin ordered Russian troops into Syria, where around 10% of the population is Christian.

“Antioch was one of the strongest supporters of that Russian intervention,” said Leustean.

“It is also a two-way street,” adds Cesari. “The ROC is able to take advantage of its privileged relationship with the Russian state to build its agenda of ‘traditional values’ at home and abroad.”

The new Russian constitution passed in July not only enables Putin to stay in office until 2036, but also includes for the first time a reference to “faith in God” and a definition of marriage as between a man and a woman.

The ROC’s strongly anti-Western line, with Patriarch Kirill blaming everything from LGBT+ rights to the 1917 Russian Revolution on “Western” ideas, is also music to the Kremlin’s ears.

Yet, for all that anti-Western rhetoric, “Ironically, ‘traditional family values’ were originally sold to the ROC by US evangelical groups, after the collapse of the Soviet Union,” said Mandaville. “Before then, the ROC hadn’t really had a position on them.”



Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill conducts a service at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, Russia, July 28, 2020. Photo: AFP via Sputnik/Sergey Pyatakov

Christian right-wing evangelical organizations such as the US-based World Congress of Families and the Alliance for Defending Freedom made a major push into Russia in the 1990s, developing strong links with ROC conservatives looking to revive the church after years of communist, atheistic rule.

“There was a convergence of interests,” said Kristina Stoeckl from the Department of Sociology at Innsbruck University, who undertook a major study of such ties. “They were all against what they saw as Western liberal values and ideas about universal human rights.”

Those links endure today, with ROC members regular guests at US evangelical “prayer breakfasts” in Washington DC and other US Christian conservative events.

“In 2016, for example,” recalls Stoeckl, “the ROC organized a conference in Washington against global persecution of Christians. For the ROC it was about persecution in the Middle East by jihadists and Islamic extremists. For the US evangelicals, it was about persecution of Christians in the US, by liberals.”

Now, too, US evangelicals are in much greater positions of authority within Trump’s administration. When he took office in 2016, Vice President Mike Pence – who spoke at that ROC 2016 conference in Washington – appointed evangelical Christians to eight out of 15 cabinet secretary positions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has also made no secret of his evangelical beliefs. In 2015, he spoke of a “never-ending struggle” until “the rapture.”

This refers to the evangelical belief that God promised the Biblical land of Israel to the Jews, with their return to that land – including the West Bank – a sign of the “rapture”, the “end of times” prophesied in the Bible as heralding global Armageddon and the return of Jesus Christ.

“People used to talk of US policy on the Middle East being influenced by a so-called Jewish lobby,” said Mandaville. “It’s more accurate to say there’s an evangelical lobby driving things.”



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (R) and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (C) visit the Rabbi of the Western Wall Shmuel Rabinovitch (L) at the Western Wall Tunnels in Jerusalem's Old City on 21 March 2019. Photo: AFP via Getty Images/Abir Sultan

“It’s striking that before Trump became president,” recalls Mandaville, “he said that you should treat both sides equally in [the Israel-Palestine] conflict. Now, though, he has endorsed a peace plan which seems to many long-time observers to come down squarely on the side of Israel.”

For Trump, “I think it’s quite clear that he realizes the only way to keep his core, conservative evangelical supporters on-side is to lean heavily in a pro-Israeli direction,” said Mandaville.

The Kremlin and ROC have both recently sought to extend their influence in Israel and Palestine, along with the wider Middle East.

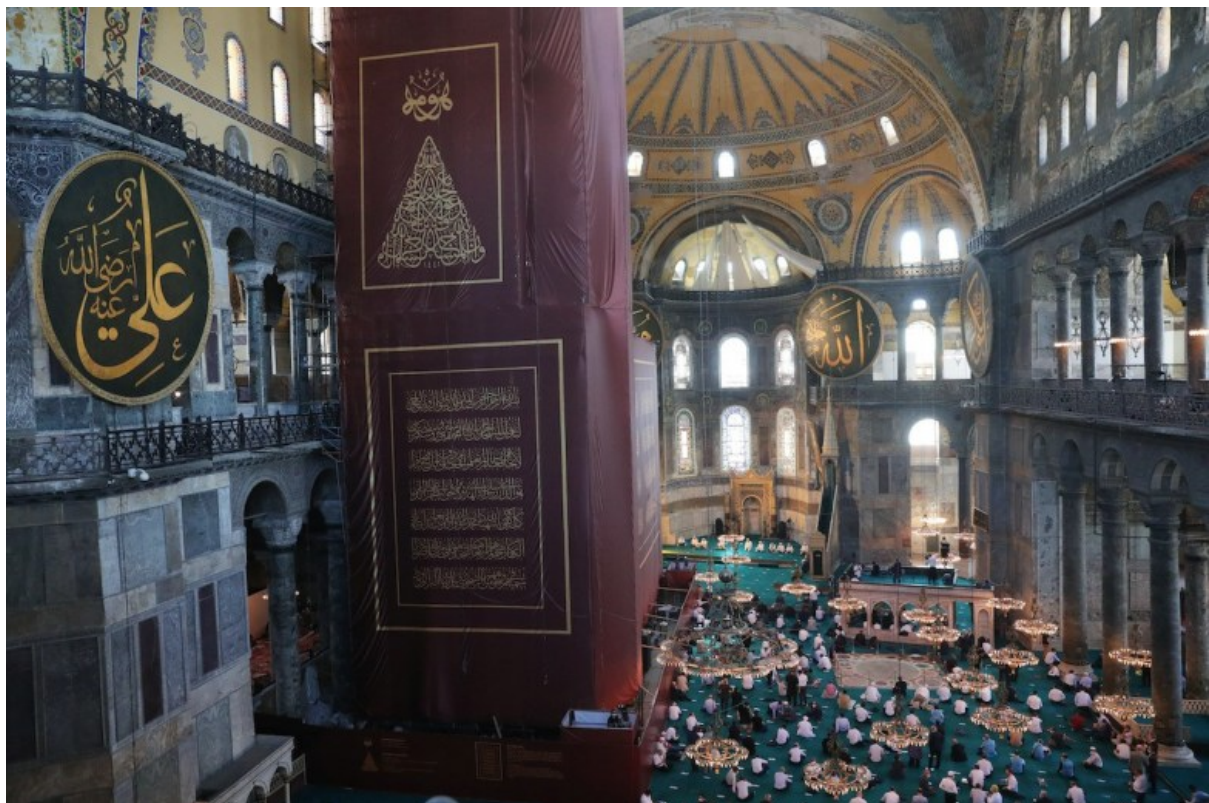
Putin explicitly declared his desire to protect the Christians of the region during a visit to Moscow by the Patriarch of Jerusalem in late 2019, when the Russian leader also declared his wish to protect Orthodox-owned properties in Jerusalem.

In January, Putin met again with the patriarchs of Antioch and Jerusalem, promising further Russian support for their Christian communities.

In July, the Syrian government announced that it would be building a replica of the Hagia Sophia, the world-renowned former Byzantine cathedral in Istanbul, with funds from Moscow.

This came after Turkey re-converted the original 1,500-year-old structure into a mosque. The replica is to be built in Suqaylabiyah, a Greek Orthodox-majority district of Hama, a Syrian city controlled by Bashar al-Assad's government with support from Russia.

The ROC's engagement with Israel and Palestine "is directly related to the orientations of the Russian state, and the extent of its desire to engage within the Palestinian territories, or the conflict with Israel," said Adnan Abu Amer, head of the political science department at the University of the Ummah in Gaza. "This desire has been growing in recent years."



A prayer program held at the Hagia Sophia Mosque ahead of the Friday prayer which was

performed for the first time after 86 years on July 24, 2020, in Istanbul, Turkey. Photo: AFP/Mustafa Kamaci/Anadolu Agency

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem declined to be interviewed for this article. Instead, he issued a statement to Asia Times that said:

“Whenever matters that are political in nature arise,” the Church “typically” responds in line with its mission of protecting “the holy places as places of worship that are open to all indiscriminately, and to tend to the Christian flock, which includes indigenous Christians of the Holy Land and pilgrims from around the world.”

Yet, for many local Palestinian Christians, there is a strong wariness when it comes to this newfound outside interest, particularly from US evangelicals.

“We see them as a threat to peace, fueling conflict and confrontation with the Muslim world,” said Father Jamal Khader from the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

“They believe the Holy Land belongs to the Jewish people by holy edict and oppose any concessions, seeing all Palestinians as Muslims. But what about Christian Palestinians? They scarcely recognize us as human beings.”

Even Israel seems to be growing wary of some messianic evangelical Christian groups. In late June, authorities shut down Hebrew-language US evangelical broadcaster GOD TV, alleging that it was trying to convert Jews.

In contrast, the influence of the ROC on the ground in Palestine is much more modest.

“The ROC has always been quite small here and not as important here as the evangelicals,” said Father Jamal Khader. “Because of its alliance with the Russian state, though, this is changing – people see the ROC as having power, because of this link.”

“The fear many have,” says Mandaville, “is that all this extra exposure, this external support, exposes the local Christians to heightened risk, by linking them to foreign powers... If you really cared about these Christians, you would be helping behind the scenes, not shining a spotlight on them.”



Young Iraqis light candles outside the Church of Saint John in the predominantly Christian Iraqi town of Qaraqosh on December 23, 2018. Photo: AFP/Ahmad Al-Rubaye

This advice seems unlikely to be followed in either Moscow or Washington, however.

“In the past, the French, the British, the Russians and the Americans have all claimed to be protectors of Christians in the Middle East,” said Cesari. “But it never really helped.”

Speaking from the ground in Palestine, Shamsiyeh posits a worst-case scenario where such links to foreign states could place a target on the backs of the region’s Christians.

“Taking into consideration what has happened in Syria, Iraq, Libya, of course it crosses our minds that if something like that happened here would we be the first to be killed?”

“I am always trying to make sure people hear the word ‘Arab’ in our school’s title,” he said.

Indeed, the Christians of Iraq might serve as a warning. Before the US-led invasion of 2003, there were 1.5 million of them; now there are just 200,000.

Many were killed in the multiple conflicts following the invasion, while others were forced to flee under threat from Islamist radical groups, their centuries-old communities vanishing with them.

The irony that this occurred with the occupation of the country on the orders of an avowedly Christian US president is not lost on believers within the region.

Minorities living here since the earliest days of Christianity have survived precisely by keeping a delicate balance with their Muslim majority neighbors – a balance that could be easily thrown off if agendas set in Washington and Moscow take precedence over centuries-old local relationships.

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