

Russian Orthodox Church says military intervention in Syria is a 'holy war'

by [Fred Weir](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue

[\(The Christian Science Monitor\)](#) For many in the West, the idea that a church would take an overtly hawkish stance in the conflict in Syria is an utterly foreign concept.

But then, the Russian Orthodox Church is not Western, said Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, the church's most recognizable spokesman, in his Moscow office.

"The idea that church and state should be alienated from each other is not a characteristic of Orthodox civilization," said the senior cleric, whose eyes almost seem to burn. "It's a characteristic of the West."

Not well known or understood in the West, the Russian Orthodox Church has been Russia's chief source of spiritual identity for most of its 1,000-year existence. Though it was nearly destroyed by the communists, it has since rebounded sharply to become once again the Kremlin's ideological bulwark.

As that relationship has solidified, the church has also integrated with the military. Russian media frequently run photos of priests blessing weaponry, including war planes, and Orthodox chaplains are embedded in most military units. And the church is underscoring its enthusiastic backing for Russia's military intervention in Syria—a fight Chaplin dramatically describes as "a holy war against terrorism."

The Orthodox Church, which has deep historical connections with the dwindling Christian communities of the Middle East, was alarmed by the mass flight of Iraq's Christians following the U.S. invasion of that country. When the conflict in Syria began almost five years ago, the church began lobbying the Kremlin to take a strong stand in defense of Syrian Christians, who are about 10 percent of the population. Experts say the church's insistence certainly played a role in President Vladimir Putin's decision to intervene directly in the conflict.

Christianity came to Russia via Byzantium, the eastern half of the old Roman Empire, which survived until the Muslim Turks overran it almost 600 years ago. The Russian Orthodox Church subsequently took up the mantle of eastern Christianity, and Moscow styled itself as the "Third Rome," with a special duty to protect

Christians of the Middle East living under Muslim rule. An 1853 proclamation by Czar Nicholas I claiming Russia's right to support Christians in the Turkish Ottoman Empire—which then included Syria and the Holy Land—precipitated the Crimean War, which pitted Russia against Turkey, Britain, and France.

“Russian czars and church for centuries maintained close relations with Middle Eastern Christians, and declared the right to support them; that's part of our historical consciousness,” said Iosif Diskin, chair of the interreligious affairs commission of the Russian Public Chamber, a semiofficial civil society assembly. “But today it's not just the church, but much of Russian society that has become agitated about the fate of Christian minorities in Syria.”

It's difficult to gauge how much the church's vocal support accounts for the public's backing of the war. But polls conducted two months into the Russian intervention showed more than half backed the air war, though more than two-thirds say they would oppose sending in Russian ground troops.

When asked by pollsters, Russians overwhelmingly aver to be religious believers; in fact, over 80 percent say so. About 70 percent of Russians identify themselves as Orthodox Christians. The remainder come from one of the constitutionally defined “founding” religions of Russia: Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism.

Yet few Russians bother to go to church on a regular basis. Chaplin said it's as many as 30 percent, other experts say the figure is more like 5 percent.

Whether they go to church or not, Chaplin argued that religious faith does shape people's consciousness, particularly with regard to the Middle East.

“Many Christians, not just Russians, see the Middle East as the crossroads of world history, as the origin and end of things,” he said. “There is a very deep interest in things that happen there.”

*This article was edited on December 31, 2015.*