



Russia Strengthens Ties with Loyalist Christian Militias in Syria's Hama Province

OE Watch Commentary: Leaders of the Russian military campaign in Syria are exploiting socio-cultural linkages to local Christian Orthodox communities to increase its influence in the country. Prior to Russian intervention, the Syrian regime, with assistance from Iran, was able to portray itself as the defender of minorities against the mostly Sunni rebellion. Russia's entry into the conflict and its self-portrayal as the defender of Christians in the Middle East has made Russia an attractive patron to Syria's Christian communities. The relationship is synergistic, as several Christian militias have proven to be effective and reliable throughout the conflict. As highlighted in the first accompanying article, from the independent Lebanese news site *al-Modon*, Russian military leaders' cultivation of ties with loyalist Christian militia seems to bypass the Syrian regime entirely, raising questions about Russia's preference for dealing with communal leaders over going through the labyrinth of corruption in the Syrian regime.

Noteworthy in this regard are the blossoming ties between Russian military leadership and militia leaders in Christian towns in the central province of Hama. Russian military-religious delegations have been consistently visiting central Hama's Christian communities since 2019, and Russian connections to the local National Defense Forces (NDF) militias have strengthened. Nabeul al-Abdullah, the head of the NDF in the town of al-Suqaylabiyah (Saqalbiyah), and Simon al-Wakil, his counterpart in the nearby town of Mahardah (Muhardeh), both meet regularly with top Russian military leadership in Syria. As the passage from the *Zaman al-Wasl* Syrian opposition news website describes, the two leaders were recently invited to a ceremony honoring Roman Filipov, the Russian fighter pilot whose plane was shot down by Turkish jets in 2018.

Al-Suqaylabiyah is a town of nearly 20,000 residents, located in Syria's al-Ghab plain, a fertile depression fed by the Orontes River that divides Sunni Idlib Province from the Shia Alawite-majority coastal mountains. The town's location near the frontline with Turkish-backed Sunni rebels in Idlib gives added meaning to Russia's use of Christian symbolism in establishing a partnership with local warlords. Last summer, a Russian delegation agreed to help build a replica of the Hagia Sophia in al-Suqaylabiyah, as a purported response to Turkey's decision to revert the original in Istanbul from museum to mosque. The church is to be built on land donated by Nabeul al-Abdullah, the head of the local NDF. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

“The delegation was headed by the priest of the Hmeimim base, Father Michael, as well as officers from the Special Forces...”



Al-Ghab Plain Viewed from Al-Suqaylabiyah.

Source: s.i.dahir, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A7%D8%A8_%D9%85%D9%86_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9_-_panoramio.jpg, Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0



Continued: Russia Strengthens Ties with Loyalist Christian Militias in Syria's Hama Province

Source:

(Russia Protects Eastern Christians and Builds a 'Hagia Sofia' in al-Suqaylabiyah)," *al-Modon* (pro-Syrian opposition, independent Lebanese news website), 27 July 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/1luxsvml>

روسيا تحمي مسيحيي المشرق وتبني آيا صوفيا في السقيلبية

According to the information, a military delegation from the Russian Hmeimim base met with officials in the National Defense militia, including Nabeul al-Abdullah and Simon al-Wakil, in the city of al-Suqaylabiyah. According to the National Defense militia's page, the delegation visited a number of Christian schools and churches and met religious figures in a tour organized by al-Abdullah for the delegation in al-Suqaylabiyah. Visits of Russian officers and clerics to the city have been taking place since the beginning of this year, which has sparked a lot of speculation and analysis in the Syrian opposition press and the Russian press alike, about Moscow's crumbling relations with the Syrian regime and its preference for supporting local militias...

The Christian towns and villages in Hama, which are relatively close to Idlib Province, have always had a Russian presence to protect Christians. In recent years, pictures and videos have spread of Russian humanitarian aid being distributed there, in parallel with disagreements between humanitarian organizations run by Asma al-Assad and others run by Christian activists like that of media figure Maggy Khouzam, who accused the regime at the time of subservience to Shiite Iran at the expense of properly protecting minorities...

Source:

(Russia Intensifies Meetings with Christian Militia Leaders in Rural Hama)," *Zaman al-Wasl* (Syrian opposition news website), 9 February 2021. <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/134615/>

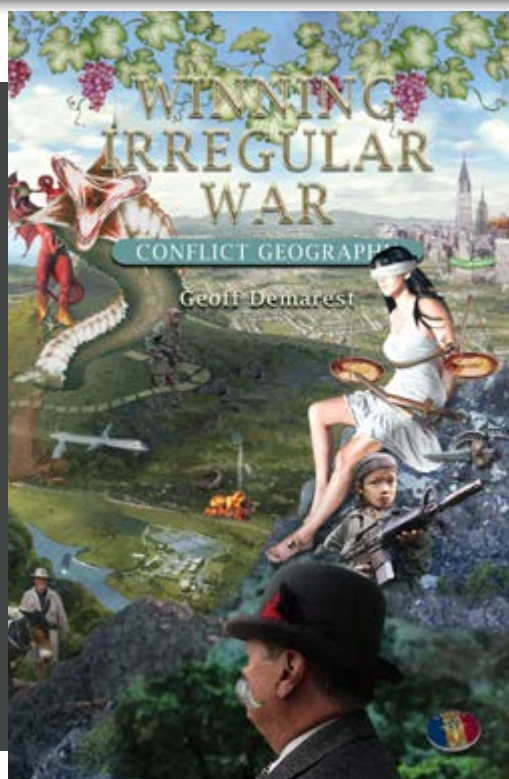
روسيا تُكثف اجتماعاتها مع قادة ميليشيات مسيحيين في ريف حماة

On Monday, Russian forces at the Hmeimim base, led by General Dmitry Valerievich Glushenkov, honored the leaders of Russian-supported "National Defense" militias from cities in the northwestern countryside of Hama, in addition to the commander of a new military formation established by Russia in Syria...

A few days before this, a Russian Christian religious delegation from the Hmeimim air base visited the farm of Nabeul al-Abdullah, the commander of the "National Defense" militia in the city of al-Suqaylabiyah. The delegation was headed by the priest of the Hmeimim base, Father Michael, as well as officers from the Special Forces. The Russian delegation inspected construction work on the (Hagia Sophia) Church, the foundation stone of which was laid last July, with the support of the Russian Duma...

On January 28, the commander of the Russian forces in Syria invited Nabeul al-Abdullah and Simon al-Wakil, leaders of the National Defense militias, to a ceremony held at Hmeimim base, to inaugurate a memorial to the Russian pilot (Roman Filippov) who was killed in February 2018, while on a sortie to carry out airstrikes in the Idlib area...

In the middle of January this year, officers of the Russian Special Forces met with an Iranian general operating in the western Hama countryside. The meeting was hosted by Nabel al-Abdullah, commander of the National Defense militia, at his headquarters on his private farm on the outskirts of al-Suqaylabiyah, to celebrate the New Year. It was preceded two weeks earlier by a meeting in the city of al-Suqaylabiyah bringing together the commander of the Russian Forces in Syria, Aleksandr Chuyko, and the commander of the 25th Division of the Russian army, with al-Abdullah and other militia leaders and officials of the Christian community in the region.



Geoff Demarest's *Winning Irregular War* is about a broader set of conflicts than just 'insurgency.' In its 144 sections, Geoff Demarest uses a distinct, reconciled, more effective strategic grammar that draws on the disciplines of law and geography over political science. As Geoff Demarest puts it: "I hope that some of the ideas in it will be contagious."

<https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-books/195392/download>