

4

**Religious Patronage and Clientelism:
Russia's Soft Power and Networks of
Influence in Syria¹**
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Introduction:

In parallel to its military aid to the Assad Regime since 2011, Russia's 'soft power' tools and forms started with the inflow of humanitarian aid to the Syrian Government and Syria Arab Red Crescent. Additionally, Russian efforts have been integrated and mobilised through religious, diaspora, political, and civil society delegations, whose communications and outreach efforts developed with visits from the Russian Orthodox Church to Syria in 2011, including the humanitarian assistance and relief initiatives that were launched to support Orthodox, displaced Christian communities and affected populations in Syria. Then, in the wake of Russia's 2015 intervention and Russian-led inflow of relief assistance, Moscow developed a networking strategy that integrates tools with aid, cultural, development, and religious dimensions. In coordination with the Hmeimim-based Russian Reconciliation Centre (RRC) in Syria, Russian Muslim communities, diaspora networks, Caucasian states (former-Soviet Islamic states), Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Imperial Palestinian Orthodox Society, and other charities from the Russia federation have started to operate in Syria. This article explores and analyses their contribution to Russian soft power in Syria, and how the wider instrumentalization of humanitarian

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aid, diaspora networks, and religious diplomacy for military and long-term political goals have been escalated to promote the Russian position in Syria. The research also argues, Marlène Laruelle analysis of Russian strategies of niche soft power that Russia's soft power in Syria is targeting micro-audiences and communities who are either favourable to Russia or disconnected and disenfranchised from liberal values.

Overview

Since 2011, the multiplication of actors involved in Russia's soft power and in Syria has increased significantly. These intertwined linkages and organizations can be categorized into five different groups: economic (trade, business, and investment), intergovernmental (diplomatic and military connections), technocratic (elites, state-connected civil society leaders, academics, students, and professionals), social (diaspora communities), and transnational (humanitarian NGOs, churches, parties, organizations). Through this myriad of connections, religious patronage, sponsorship, and clientelism, and Russian-supported NGOs have been the most distinctive Russian strategy to strengthen linkages and entrench networks.

Russia humanitarian operations have been developed in parallel with its growing military role in all the Syrian regions and with Russia's growing role in all the negotiations between the Government of Syria and rebel groups. Thus, Russia emerged as a facilitator and provider of humanitarian aid; thus, Russia forces intervened as protector of relief convoys of the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Syrian Red Crescent in besieged opposition-held and hard-to-reach areas, mainly in

Eastern Ghouta², Homs and Rural Homs³, al-Rukban Camp in the southern areas⁴, Afrin⁵ and Rural Aleppo⁶-- a strategy which Russia seems to be replicating in Ukraine, hence to form part of a wider foreign policy strategy that combines, hard (military) and soft (humanitarian) forms of power.

In the literature, Russian soft power has been subject to extensive academic interest, especially in relation to Russia's aims of increasing its influence in the post-Soviet space. Numerous studies have examined the soft power strategies and resources employed by the Russian state to further its foreign policy interests⁷⁸, and Russia's contemporary foreign policy philosophy.⁹ This paper is based on the scholarship of soft power including the original concept designed by Joseph Nye, and on the bulk of extant literature on the theoretical aspects of Russia's soft power

² Sputnik News, "(video) The humanitarian work of Russian soldiers inside the shelters for the people of Ghouta" (in Arabic), 07.03.2018, <https://bit.ly/2A30WzS>

³ Sputnik News, "The Russian Reconciliation Center provides humanitarian aid to refugees in Al-Rastan city in Homs countryside", 13 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/2By70Ri>

⁴ Russia today "Syria: A UN aid convoy, with Russian protection, to Rukban camp", 06 Feb 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NnGixj>

⁵ Russia today "Russian forces accompany an international aid convoy to Afrin", 2 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Vcu2UI>

⁶ Interview and observations in Daraa with group of the senior officials and head of operations at SARC's Daraa Office, February 2019 Its important to mention that some SARC officials in Daraa are working under the management of Russian officers, and one of them report directly to the Russian base in Daraa.

⁷ Andis Kudors and Gatis Pelnens. "Diverging faces of 'soft power' in Latvia between the EU and Russia." *The Different Faces of "soft Power": the Baltic States and Eastern Neighbourhood between Russia and the EU*. LIIA, Riga (2015)

⁸ Hugo Flavier. "Russia's normative influence over post-Soviet States: the examples of Belarus and Ukraine." *Russian Law Journal* 3, no. 1 (2015)

⁹ Andrew Monaghan, "The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept: Evolving Continuity", Chatham House April 2013, <https://bit.ly/3rZVFAf>

strategy.¹⁰ Building upon this previous research, this article seeks to explain Russia's soft power strategies by examining the institutional mechanisms and resources behind Russia's contemporary soft power approach after the intervention in Syria¹¹ As hard and soft power are related in many aspects, and both are connected in their ability to achieve one's purpose by affecting and influencing the present and future behaviour of others, the Kremlin's inclination to the combination of the soft and hard power strategies is worthy of analysis. This study takes Syria as a case study of how Russia has, as illustrated above, tried to combine hard and soft power.

This article hopes to contribute to the literature through a focus not only on governmental agencies, but also on the non-governmental sector actively involved in Russia's soft power activities abroad. The study is based on field visits of the author in Damascus and Rural Damascus, Homs, Eastern Ghouta and Daraa between July and December 2019. It relies on direct observations and meetings with former managers and aid workers of several organizations, including the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (DERD), the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East (GOPA), St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC), Syria Trust for Development, Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), local charities and civil society actors. The author also conducted twenty extensive interviews with Damascus-based businessmen, Syrian-Caucasians, former employees, and Sheiks connected to the Syrian Ministry of Endowments, Ministry of Social Affairs,

¹⁰ Lukyanov, Fyodor. "Russian Dilemmas in A Multipolar World." *Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (2010), Troitski M. (2011) 'Russian Soft Power in the European Union'. Paper presented at the 'Russian Soft Power: Perspectives and Prospects' conference, Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, Warsaw, 20 December, <http://mikhailtroitski.livejournal.com/2099.html>, Joseph Nye, "What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power." *Foreign Policy*. April 29, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3geXc2F>

¹¹ Joseph Nye, "Soft Power After Ukraine", Project Syndicate, May 3, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3VxAcw8>

humanitarian workers and INGOs employees in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, and Beirut. A range of open sources, including Russian governmental and Russian NGOs websites, Syrian newspapers, and related posts on social media were also consulted.

Regaining influence: The dimensions of Moscow's connections and soft power in Syria

Since Soviet times, Syria had been considered a strategically important ally of Moscow. If we bear in mind the links and connections between Syria and Soviet Union (USSR), through the historical support for Syria, scholarships, and marriages, and the thousands of Syrians who went to Russia to be trained, or are alumni of Soviet-era universities, it can be seen that the Soviet era created potentially fertile ground for Russian soft power within large sections of Syrian society. But, on the other side, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has lost its connections and influence many former allies, and Syria one of those that started to be less engaged with Russia over the 1990s and 2000s. Before the Syria Uprising, Syria had moved to diversify its linkages with many countries and institutions, such as the EU, China, Turkey, and the U.S, who managed to gain more influence in the region. With the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, there had been a revival of the multiple pre-existing historic, economic, and political ties between the two countries, albeit in new forms and contexts.

Overall, Russia since 2011 has elevate itself at the level of foreign aid donors by playing an important role in delivering or facilitating humanitarian assistance/¹² ¹³ Aid to Syria has

¹² "The Russian Federation donates \$3 million to boost food security and nutrition in Syria", *FAO*, 19 December 2018, <https://bit.ly/3bYHNvH>

¹³ Russia today "Russian forces accompany an international aid convoy to Afrin", 2 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Vcu2UI>, see also: Syria News Agency, "A Russian aid plane arrives at the martyr Basil Al-Assad airport in Latakia", 28 May 2015, <https://bit.ly/2VsVgq6>, Sputnik News, "The Russian

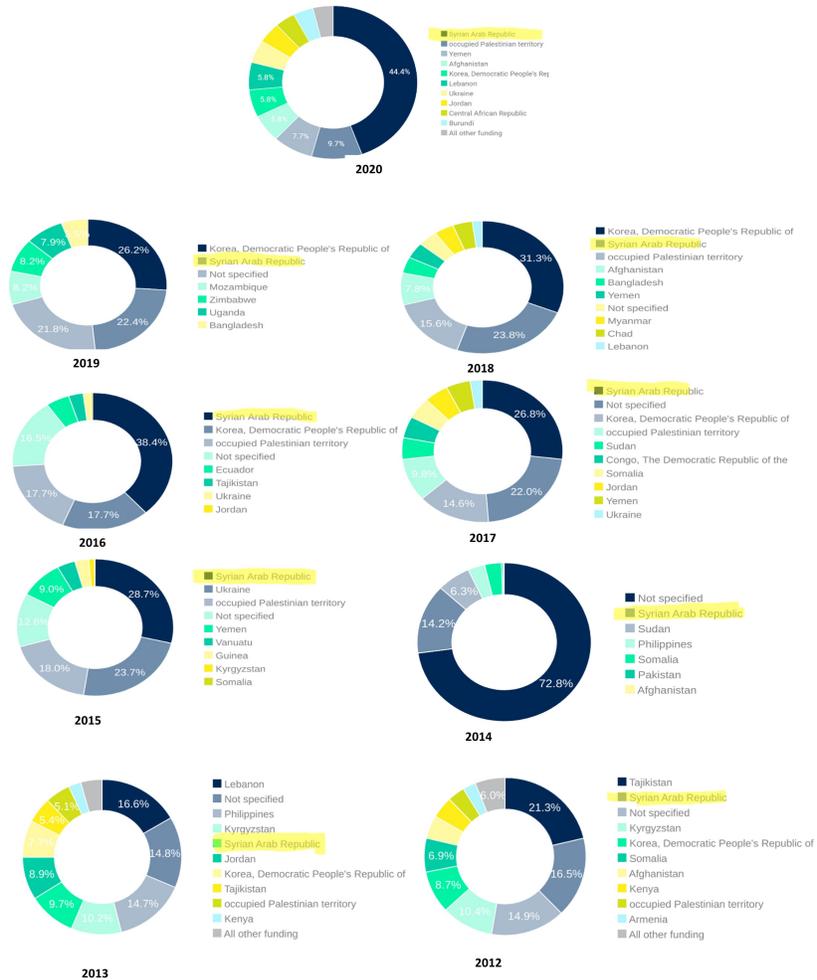
constituted a large proportion of total Russian aid (see figure 1) parallel to Russian diplomatic and military activities in the country; this is not surprising considering that Syrian military intervention is Russia's first direct military involvement abroad since the fall of the Soviet Union. Yet Russian involvement in the humanitarian field has also taken negative forms, since late 2019 and during 2020,¹⁴ when it has led efforts to cut and block cross-border UN-led humanitarian aid to four million Syrians in the North of Syria, and, by limiting UN humanitarian assistance to Al-Rukban Camp¹⁵. Among the targets of the Russia effort has Syria's Muslim communities. Russian-supported outreaches to Syrian Muslims are tied to Moscow's overall soft diplomacy with the Islamic world. The activities of Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic since 2009, has gone beyond traditional diplomacy to include promoting Russian agendas in Syria, the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan, aiming to facilitate Moscow's return to the Middle East. Chechen, Ingush, and Dagestan humanitarian activities have also been serving Russia's interests. At the same time, the historical role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russian foreign diplomacy, and in Syria since decades has been increased to serve Russian efforts to build patronage relationships with Syrian Christians and to promote Russian interests to create enabling environments for Russia's long-term plans in Syria. In parallel to these strategies, the new key actors of facilitating Russian soft power in Syria include Moscow-based NGOs (in reality GONGOs), who have been deployed in several Russian-backed initiatives through faith-based charities from Chechnya, Caucasus, Ingushetia, Armenia, and Belarus. With Russia's battlefield success and the

Reconciliation Center provides humanitarian aid to refugees in Al-Rastan city in Homs countryside", 13 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/2By70Ri>

¹⁴ "Statement from Ambassador Craft on Russian and Chinese Vetoes of a UN Security Council Resolution to Extend Cross-Border Aid in Syria", U.S. Mission to the United Nations, July 7, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3k1IsBS>

¹⁵ Neil Hauer, "Russia and the Rukban refugee camp" *Middle East Institute*, 10 April 2019

Figure 1: Funding allocations to affected countries, Russian Federation (2012-2020) - UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service



upper hand in the key regions and sectors of Syria, the involvement of these broad range of Russian-supported actors in humanitarian, religious, cultural and reconstruction actions has become larger and more significant.

The lesson to take away from this research is that when we overly focus on the military and economic factors of Russia's involvement, much of the story is lost. It is the often-overlooked cultural, community, religious bonds, and sub-relationships between several Syrian and Russian communities which substantially support Russia's intervention and successes at different levels. In this regard, less attention has been paid than they deserve to many of these bonds, historical ties, renewed relationships, that has been 'creating' opportunities for developing new Russian footholds and influence in Syrian communities.¹⁶ As Russia's involvement in the country continues to raise many questions regarding the impact of these networks, a comprehensive overview of these linkages, foundations and NGOs seems crucial.

Therefore, the next sections goes in-depth on exposition of the actors--NGOs, and local partners used by Russia to implement programmes and deliver assistance to the Syrian population, looking at the role of the Kadyrov Foundation (a Chechen state-linked charitable organization), the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian political parties and groups. The main questions that constitute this research is the purpose do these institutions and how effective are they in regard to enhancing Russian regional image and presence and to consolidating the state's power in Syria.

Chechen-Syrian Relationships: Religious Networks and Diaspora Mobilization: Muslim communities and local political networks

The Chechen-Syrian relationship originates from the ethnic connections between Chechnya and several areas of Syria, which was the refuge and home for several thousand Caucasians and

¹⁶ Among the few articles published on the issue, Marika Sosnowski and Paul Hastings, "Exploring Russia's Humanitarian Intervention in Syria", Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 25 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/3fN5nxO>

Chechen forced migrants between 1864 -1890.¹⁷ These historical ties are also embodied in religious linkages between the Sufi Sunni Muslims in built on the fact that Syria and Soviet Islamic states, related to the fact that Syrian mosques and Sufi shrines are considered especially holy. Additionally, prior to the Syrian Crisis in 2011, the markets of Damascus were full of Chechnian al-Haj pilgrims who used to sell their products and goods during the return trip from Saudi Arabia. With the facilitation of the Syrian regime, the state-supported Islamic institutes have been the destinations and host for hundreds of Chechen scholars, clerks, and students.¹⁸

These historical factors and religious links should not be ignored in an examination of Russia's outreach to Syria, given the close bonds of cohesion between the Russian Muslim community and Islamic organizations in the Levant.¹⁹ Additionally, owing to the support of Assad's regime for Russia's military campaigns in Chechnya during the 2000s, Syrian ties with the Russian-supported Kadyrov's government started to develop in 2008. Officially, in what has been hailed as a sign of deepening ties with Damascus, the Grand Mufti of Chechnya and Chechen officials visited Syria's Endowments Minister and Grand Muftis in 2008. Then, this visit was followed by another parliamentary delegation from Chechnya to several Syrian ministries, and several visits to the Chechen community in Al-Hasakah city in the Northeast of Syria in 2009.²⁰

¹⁷ Dawn Chatty, "Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State", UK, London: Hurst & Company (2017).

¹⁸ These institutes include the following Damascus-based religious schools: 1) Sheikh Ahmad Kuftaro Foundation, Complex and Institute, 2) Al-Fateh Islamic Institute, 3) Bader Al-Din Hasani Institute.

¹⁹ Elaph, "2008, the year of the Chechen Republic's exit to the international stage", February 27, 2008, <https://bit.ly/3kxo0li>

²⁰ General Organization of Syrian Arab Radio and TV Newspaper, "Al-Abrash discusses with a Chechen delegation way to develop parliamentary relations", 7 April 2009, see also: E-Syria, "Parliamentary delegation from "Chechnya" in "Hasaka", 7 April 2009, <https://bit.ly/3RQSlmx>

Since 2010, the linkages and ‘fraternal relationship’ between Kadyrov’s regime and the United Arab Emirates have also created a common ground and contributed to the flourishing of the Russian-Chechen-Syrian relationship after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict.²¹ In the context of Russia’s ambitions in the Arab region, UAE’s investments in Grozny and patronage of religious institutions there has grown remarkably.²² For instance, Russia and UAE’s *Tabah Foundation*²³ supported and funded the International Conference on Sunni Islam in Grozny in 2016. The event was sponsored by Ramzan Kadyrov and convened by the Ahmad Kadyrov Regional Charitable Fund and Foundation for Chechen Islamic Culture and Education.²⁴ Most importantly, it was attended by several of Assad’s regime-supported senior Muslim figures, scholars, and preachers, including Ahmad Baddreddin Hassoun (Grand Mufti of Syria) and Abdel-Fattah al-Bezm (Grand Mufti of Damascus), some of whom had also contributed to the activities and forums of UAE’s *Tabah Foundation*.

In the political spheres, with the Russian military interventions in 2015, Chechnia became one of the key instruments of Russia’s soft power promotion as Kadyrov launched a campaign to support Putin’s intervention in Syria. Visits and delegations between Syria’s Ministry of Endowments, Syrian Muslim scholars

²¹ Arabian Business, “Russia’s Muslim Chechnya asks UAE to invest \$2.3bn”, 17 Feb 2011, <https://bit.ly/3k3yWgq>

²² Al-Bayan, “Chechen President and Nahyan bin Mubarak inaugurate the Zayed Center in Grozny”, 25 August 2011, <https://bit.ly/33Dv6Ex>, On investments, see also: The National, “UAE to step up support for economy in Chechnya”, 27 Dec 2018, <https://bit.ly/3mwy1WU>

²³ Tabah Foundation: An Abu Dhabi-based Islamic institution and Neo-traditional Islam think tank that focuses on spiritual and cultural activities, established in 2005 by Sheikh al-Habib Ali al-Jifri, strongly UAE backed Yemeni scholar and a close confidante of the UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan.

²⁴ Huffington Post News, “The Sunni Conference in Grozny: A Muslim Intra-Sectarian Struggle for Legitimacy”, 18 Sep 2016, <https://bit.ly/33Enjq2>

and Chechen's president grew significantly.²⁵ As did humanitarian activities. In 2016 the deployment of Chechen battalions to Russian bases in Syria deepened the Chechen role.²⁶

Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation:

Chechnya's support for Russia's intervention in Syria took the form of various humanitarian relief initiatives. The Chechen government-run charity (Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation - AKF)²⁷ started its humanitarian campaigns for Syria during the month of Ramadan in 2016 initiating the "Bread Crumb" projects, by sponsoring and funding distributions of twenty-five thousand meals and bread on a daily basis, to several areas in Aleppo, Damascus and its countryside.²⁸

With the support from the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs, these campaigns targeted Syrian and Palestinian IDPs in collective shelters and centres in both Aleppo and Damascus (including areas around Al-Yarmouk Palestinian Camp, Sehnaya, Husseiniya, Shaghour and Midan neighbourhoods), in cooperation with local charitable organizations such as Sunduq al-'afiya (Health Fund) and Nour Foundation.²⁹ The AKF also sent around 120 tons of aid, under the motto of 'Solidarity with our Muslim brothers in Syria' including donations of more than 2,500 sheep, 100 bulls and ten camels to displaced families in

²⁵ Syrian News Agency, "Chechen President to Mufti Hassoun: Those who wage war against Syria are the enemies of Islam", 3 Nov 2014, <https://bit.ly/3myzPzV>

²⁶ Neil Hauer, "Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens", foreign policy, 4 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/3cOvti2>

²⁷ The Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation was created in 2004. It is headed by Aiman Kadyrova, the widow of Akhmat Kadyrov, and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov is the chairman of its board of trustees.

²⁸ Syria In (Blog), "Ten thousand food parcels from the Chechen people to the Syrian people" (in Arabic), 29 June 2016, <https://bit.ly/3dJIWdy>

²⁹ Interview with a charity worker in Damascus, November 2019; Interview with a local humanitarian officer in Rural Damascus (Nour Foundation), December 2019

Damascus and its suburbs, Latakia, Tartous and Aleppo and thousands of hot meals and bread bags to the households in Damascus and Rural Damascus (Barzeh, Kafarsouseh, Mazzeh, Al Duwailah, Bab Musalla, Sayeda Zeinab and Tabbala).³⁰ Then, under the supervision and facilitation of the Hmeimim-based Russian Reconciliation Center (RRC),³¹ AKF's aid and relief activities concentrated on areas recaptured by or reconciled to the government under Russian mediation.

Local Agents and Partners of Kadyrov Foundation in Syria: The management of Chechnya's presence in Syria has been entrusted to Ziad Sabsabi, the Russian-backed Chechen envoy and Aleppo-born Chechen politician. The available information shows that Sabsabi studied in Damascus University and in Leningrad University in the 90s. Thereafter Sabsabi was an advisor for Akhmad Kadyrov's foreign and international relations during the First Chechen War (1991-1997). Then, over the 2000s he continued doing this role during the Second Chechen War (1997-2007), during the presidential period of both Ahmad Kadyrov (1996-2004) and Alu Alkhanov (2004-2007).³² Since the end of the war in 2007, from 2008 to 2019, he was the Chechens' representative at Russia's Duma and Russian Senator, as

³⁰ Zaman Al-Wasl, "Kadyrov "donates" 25,000 meals to the residents and displaced of Damascus under the supervision of a Russian of Syrian origin" (in Arabic), 7 June 2016, <https://bit.ly/2X1ktcB>

³¹ Its official name is the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring, which is part of the Russian Ministry of Defence and is headquartered in Hmeimim Air Base in Latakia. The Centre currently presents its work to "resolve the conflict in a non-military manner and to provide comprehensive assistance to Syrian citizens in restoring peaceful life". It publishes regular bulletins about its activities on https://syria.mil.ru/peacemaking_en.htm

³² Murad Batal al- Shishani, "Uncovering the Motives Behind Alkhanov's Visit to Syria and Jordan", *James Town Foundation*, 13 Oct 2005, <https://bit.ly/2YEFZVu>

well as the deputy chairman of the Federation Council's foreign affairs committee.³³

In the Arab region, he officially became responsible for Ramzan Kadyrov's foreign policy in the Middle East, as well as the vice president of the Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation since its establishment in 2004.³⁴ Since 2004, Sabsabi was the head of or part of the Chechen delegations to Syria, Jordan, Iraq, UAE, Palestine,³⁵ and during 2011, he accompanied Russian delegations' visits to Syria, as well as networking with the Russian-connected Syrian political and figures in Damascus.³⁶ The later allowed Sabsabi to build deeper sub-state political connections, and most importantly, support Ramzan Kadyrov, and Russia patronage networks in many areas of Syria, and across local political groups.³⁷

With the Russian intervention in 2015, Sabsabi started to build connections with Syrian ministers and political and tribal elites.³⁸ He often supervised the Chechen-run and Russian-led humanitarian convoys and Chechen forces in several Kurdish-run areas³⁹ and joined AKF aid distributions and Ramadan

³³ Pavel Luzin, "Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Top Diplomat", RIDDLE Russia, 19 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/3nYXfz9>, "Ziyad Mukhamedovich" (in Russian), Wikipedia, <https://bit.ly/2IGMWzG>

³⁴ Interview with Caucasian-Syrian activist, November 2019.

³⁵ Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Uncovering the Motives Behind Alkhanov's Visit to Syria and Jordan", *James Town Foundation*, 13 Oct 2005, <https://bit.ly/2YEFZVu>

³⁶ Al-Akhbar, "Moscow offers to host the dialogue of the regime and its opponents", 21 September 2011, <https://bit.ly/3o6tiNV>

³⁷ Observations in Eastern Ghouta and Damascus during 2019 (During AKF events and gatherings), and an interview with group of humanitarian workers in Eastern Ghouta and Damascus, June 2019.

³⁸ Tishreen University, "Comrade Hilal meets Al-Sebsby and affirms the development of political, economic, scientific and investment relations with Russia", Facebook, 3:45 p.m., 12 Jan 2016, <https://bit.ly/31c6wu8>

³⁹ Al-7al News, "Ziyad Sabsabi from Qamishli: Russia has always insisted on the participation of the Kurdish component in the Syrian conferences" (in Arabic), 13 November 2017, <https://bit.ly/2BJQZY0>

gatherings in Eastern Aleppo,⁴⁰ Homs, Southern Damascus and Eastern Ghouta.⁴¹ For many years since 2011, as the only Russian-backed official representative of Chechnya in Syria, Sabsabi has been one of the most prominent names in the military, diplomatic and humanitarian Russian-supported corps in Syria.⁴² For instance, on the ground, one of his special missions was organising the return to Russia of some ISIS's Chechens and their families from Syria and Iraq in 2016 and 2017, in coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces and Kurdish authorities in both Syria and the Kurdistan region.⁴³

Interestingly, the original ethnographic research on transnational kinship networks of the Assad regime published by Paul Anderson (2021) includes detailed information and supporting evidence on Sabsabi and his relatives in exile and Syria.⁴⁴ This seminal ethnographic work reflects the historical Russian efforts in Syria since 1990s to build transnational networks, including Sabsabi's use of his clan and tribal relations as informal channels to exercise soft power and diplomacy at local levels. This strategy has allowed the Russian after 2015 to extend these informal alliances, integrating them and use them as entry points into states and societies.

And, according to several activists in Damascus and Aleppo, since 2015, Sabsabi made more regular visits to Aleppo and

⁴⁰ Eqtsad, "Russia is with you"...bread flavored with blood, distributed by a Chechen association in Aleppo (in Arabic), 13 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2TzFkS4>

⁴¹ Enab Baladi, "A man in the news...Ziyad Sabsabi, a Russian "multi-use" local agent", 30 Jan 2018, <https://bit.ly/3dKSm7x>

⁴² Syrian New Agency, "Prime Minister Dr. Wael al-Hilqi meets Ziyad Sabsabi, a member of the Federal Council of the Russian Federation", 10 January 2016, <https://bit.ly/3f90PSd>

⁴³ Syria Scope, "SDF hand over Chechen families to the Russian side" (in Arabic), 13 November 2017, <https://bit.ly/3Vw4QWK>

⁴⁴ Paul Anderson. The Social Life of Syrian Diplomacy: Transnational Kinship Networks of the Assad Regime, *History and Anthropology*, (2022). 33:3, 391-406, DOI: 10.1080/02757206.2021.1946052

Damascus, largely to work with the Russian Reconciliation Centre and Russian officials - as a focal point and extension of Russia's diplomacy and outreach processes. As result, his communications with pro-regime political groups, tribes, and leaders of armed militants grew more than ever before.⁴⁵ Sabsabi was even able to unite the so-called 'Damascus-based national opposition' [internal opposition] and Russian supporters in Syria. By 2017, these groups formed what is known as the Assad-connected Syrian oppositions-called the national opposition of Hmeimim-Russia's Reconciliation Centre.⁴⁶ Additionally, through these networks and during Russian Embassy convened events, and celebrations and gatherings in Damascus with political and regime figures, Sabsabi used and relied on his kinship networks in rural Aleppo, Homs and Northern Syria, along with tribal and clan connections to strengthened the local diplomacy and alliance between the pro-regime Syrian figures and communities and Russian representatives and officials, through organizing and supporting pro-Russian events, pro-regime dialogues, and gatherings with all major ethnic and tribal factions.⁴⁷ During this period, for example, he befriended many warlords such as Hussam Qaterji, the prominent tribal figure Nawaf Abdulaziz Tarad Al-Mulhim (the party leader of the People's Party) and Sheikh Muhammad Khair Jasim Al-Nader (MP from the Naim

⁴⁵ Facebook interview with Aleppo-based humanitarian worker, July 2020.

⁴⁶ The identified names/parties that has been supported by Russian, always communicating and meeting Sabsabi include: Elian MUSAAD (National Congress Party) - Ali Haider (Minister of National Reconciliation) - Mahmoud Marei and Mais Kreidi (National Democratic Action Commission) - Nawaf al-Melhem (Al-Hasana tribe, Secretary-General of the People's Party) - Mazen Bilal (Secular Democratic Wing, the Syrian Labor Commission) - Joseph Joreige (Democratic Pressure Front, and the United Communist Party) - Enas Al-Hamal (National Development Party) - Ahmed Kousa (Secretary-General of the Syrian Democratic Party) - Mustafa Qalaji (Syrian Change and Renaissance Party) - Marwa Al-Itouni (Damascus Chamber of Industry and the head of the National Bloc Party) - and Hani El-Khoury (Syrian Peace Party) - Tariq Al-Ahmad (Syrian Social Nationalist Party). (See also: Al-Araby, "Hmeimim delegation to represent the "internal opposition" ... the Russian decision and the mandate of the regime" (in Arabic), April 19, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3dGyxij>)

⁴⁷ Interview with a businessman in Damascus, connected to the circles of several Syrian parliamentarians, July 2019.

tribe).⁴⁸ He also established relations with local leaders involved in ‘reconciliation’ processes, such as Abd al-Latif al-Bunni in the city of al-Tal in Rural Damascus, Imad al-Aqbani’ who was the local representative of the RCR in Sweida governorate. He also established ties with armed militants, building on the strong ties between the Chechen government and pro-Asad Palestinian factions,⁴⁹ and militias, such as Liwa al-Quds, which operates as part of the Damascus-based *Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command* (PFLP-GC). Sabsabi also built strong relations with founder and leader of PFLP-GC, Ahmad Jibril. In addition, his linkages extended beyond pro-regime figures to include Abdel Karim Omar, co-chairman of the Foreign Affairs Authority of the Kurdish Self-Administration in the Gezira Region and Nuri Mahmoud of the Kurdish People's Protection Units, among others.⁵⁰ Sabsabi was also active overseeing and developing Chechnya's humanitarian operations. For that, he has established relations with several Syrian charities, Baath party branches, NGOs and the Syrian High Relief Committee in Aleppo, Rural Aleppo, Damascus, Rural Damascus, Daraa and in the Kurdish areas in the north-east.⁵¹

Beyond Sabsabi, since 2017, the Kadyrov’s Foundation has also implemented its distribution programmes, campaigns, and other activities through two key local partners: the pro-regime Kurdish

⁴⁸ Author interview with Palestinian humanitarian worker in Damascus, July 2019

⁴⁹ Akhbar AlAan, "Detailed information about the Al-Quds Brigade...from the Iranian embrace to the Russian embrace against the Syrians", June 06, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3dBMoq5>

⁵⁰ Interview with a Syrian activist from Aleppo, (Skype call) January 2020.

⁵¹ Berwin Ibrahim, "The efforts of the Youth Party for Building and Change to return the Russian citizens to their homeland, in cooperation with Senator Dr. Ziad Sebsby, and General Alexei Kim, representative of the Russian Ministry of Defense"(in Arabic), Facebook, 13 Nov 2017, 5:35 a.m., <https://bit.ly/3j6lZBZ>

politician, Bruin Ibrahim,⁵² who is the Secretary-General of the Youth Party for Building and Change (YPBC) and the pro-Assad National Democratic Assembly of Syrian Kurds, and a Damascus-based Palestinian figure, Mohamad Jalbout, who is the chairman of one of the largest local pro-regime NGOs in Syria, Nour Foundation. It is noteworthy that both have offices and sub-offices in many regime-held areas (Damascus, Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Rural Aleppo, Tartous, Deir-Zor, Daraa and Sewidaa), as well as Kurdish-held areas (Qamishli and al-Hasakah). These two well-connected figures to both the RRC and officials in Damascus have emerged as a part of the Russian-Chechen network of influence,⁵³ within the Syrian NGOs sector.⁵⁴

Lastly, all these above-mentioned names and figures have been part of the Russian-supported cluster of Syrian NGOs and pro-regime political circles.⁵⁵ During the period between 2018 and 2019, all of them have visited Russia and Chechnya regularly many times and are always invited to attend the Russian gatherings and events in both Damascus and Moscow.⁵⁶ For instance, in 2021, Bruin Ibrahim, Mohamad Jalbout, and Nawaf

⁵² Sputnik News, "Bruin Ibrahim: official meetings in Russia and a letter from Bogdanov to President Assad" (in Arabic), 27 October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2A80waW>

⁵³ Youth Party for Development and Change, "Celebrate the National Day of the Russian Federation" (in Arabic), 23 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/2T3mUIE>

⁵⁴ Syria Youth Party (Blog), "The meeting between the delegation of the Youth Party and national forces (Civil Society Reps.) with the Chechen president" (in Arabic), 26 Oct 2018, <https://bit.ly/3cQeGem>

⁵⁵ Youth Party for Development and Change, "Last Thursday, the Youth for Building and Change Party held a reception at the "Dama Rose" Hotel in Damascus. The ceremony included a number of officials, ambassadors, representatives of foreign missions, heads of national parties, political and media figures, in addition to the presence of Russian Senator Ziad Sebsby", Facebook, 1:15 p.m., 13 Jan 2019, <https://bit.ly/3j49A1u>

⁵⁶ Visions Sy, "The National Dialogue Follow-up Committee meets Mikhail Bogdanov" (in Arabic), 15 Feb 2022, <https://bit.ly/3wm8Ajh>

Abdulaziz Tarad Al-Mulhim, leading parties and figures of several pro-regime events,⁵⁷ held several meetings in Moscow with the officials from Russian Foreign Ministry.⁵⁸

AKF areas of interventions, programmes and projects:

From 2016, AKF humanitarian relief efforts have supported the efforts of the Russian Reconciliation Center (RCC). It implemented several feeding campaigns, foodstuffs, toys and school kits distributions, with RCC representatives in Maaloula in Rural Damascus,⁵⁹ and inside several shelters and IDPs centres in Tartous, Aleppo,⁶⁰ Damascus, Sewidaa, Qamishli and Latakia.⁶¹ With the implementation of the Russian-supported humanitarian corridors in both Aleppo (2017) and Eastern Ghouta (2018), AKF emerged as part of the Russian-led humanitarian operations. In Eastern Ghouta, for instance, prominently in 2018, Russian forces and AKF's teams provided food and aid supplies and were stationed on the lines of all humanitarian corridors and collective shelters in each of Eastern Ghouta (Al-Wafidin crossing - Jesrin crossing - Harasta crossing - Al-Baz crossing).⁶² Some of these distributions were implemented in cooperation with

⁵⁷ Al Nahda News, "Damascus hosted the "Syrian National Dialogue" conference... Rejecting all forms of division and external interference" (in Arabic), 30 August 2021, <https://bit.ly/3wIDmsE>

⁵⁸ Youth Party for Development and Change, "مؤتمر الحوار السوري – السوري دائم ... الانعقاد بحظر رحاله الاولى في موسكو", Facebook, 11:50 a.m, 7 Sept 2021, <https://bit.ly/3IqH5HY>, see also: "وفد لجنة متابعة الحوار الوطني", Facebook, 15 Feb 2022 09:23 p.m, <https://bit.ly/3Io1Jsb> / <https://bit.ly/3toPQxT>

⁵⁹ Syrian News Agency, "A batch of Chechen aid distributed to the people in Maaloula, Damascus countryside – video" (in Arabic), 04 July 2016, <https://bit.ly/30ZEpz1>

⁶⁰ Time Media, "Kadyrov Charity Association holds a big party for Syrian children", 7 July 2016, <https://bit.ly/3i38EuV>

⁶¹ Sputnik News, "Chechen Charity Fund Sends 80 Tons of Humanitarian Aid to Syria", 24 December 2016, <https://bit.ly/2zlb8U3>

⁶² Author observations in Eastern Ghouta, Feb-July 2018, see also: Russia Today "Kadyrov Fund provides humanitarian aid to the people of Ain Tarma" (in Arabic), 15 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/3i4z1Qh>

local officials and community leaders in each of the recaptured areas of Eastern Ghouta (e.g., Sunduq al-'afiya - Health Fund).

In collaboration with the Youth Party for Building and Change and Nour Foundation, AKF sponsored the establishment of “Youth Volunteering Teams” with around 500 volunteers in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Aleppo, as well as the Kurdish areas. These teams have worked for Kadyrov’s Foundation and supported the aid distribution coverage of AKF to localities in Rural Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta (e.g., Arbin, Duma, Harasta, Haza, and Ein Tarma), and a few villages in Sewidaa.⁶³ Also, it has collaborated with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Syrian High Relief Committee in each Syrian governorate, Asma Al-Assad’s foundation (Syria Trust for Development) and local NGOs.⁶⁴

By the end of 2016, Chechnya humanitarian aid to Syria has been increasingly concentrated on more on-site organized distributions and programmed forms of foodstuffs distributions, supplies and reconstruction pledges. Over the first years of Russian intervention, Kadyrov Foundation was active in implementing collective kitchens,⁶⁵ organizing ‘Families of Martyrs’ campaigns in different areas of Aleppo, Rural Aleppo, and Rural Damascus,⁶⁶ as well as youth-based activities and engagements.⁶⁷ As mentioned earlier, in coordination with AKF’s local partners, Russian military officials and representatives in each of these

⁶³ Delivery and distributions reports of AKF between 2016-2018, private source.

⁶⁴ Author observations and field work, Rural Damascus 2018-2020.

⁶⁵ من موائد الرحمن في رمضان.. وبحضور كريم من السيناتور زياد سبسي مدير جمعية الشهيد احمد قاديروف #ريف_دمشق #عربين #جمعيةالشهيداحمدقاديروف”, Facebook, 03:12 a.m., 18 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2zU5xEi>

⁶⁶ Syrian News Agency, “The Martyr Akhmad Kadyrov Association in cooperation with the Russian Coordination Center in Hmeimim honor, families of martyrs, orphan children, and displaced families – video” (in Arabic), 11 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/3fLhefF>

⁶⁷ Nour Foundation “A ceremony for volunteers from the Nour Association for Relief and Development in Sednaya”) in Arabic), 20 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Xh3sel>

areas,⁶⁸ AKF's humanitarian operations have covered most of Aleppo and Rural Aleppo, Rural Damascus and Eastern Ghouta, as the primary focus of Russia during 2016-2018. For instance, the distributions had targeted the most affected areas of Rural Damascus, Southern Damascus (Yarmouk Camp and Southern areas of Damascus, Daraya, Eastern Damascus, and Palestinian affected communities), as well as Eastern and North of Aleppo.⁶⁹ While in the coastal areas, in both 2018 and 2019, some Chechen relief activities focused on delivering and distributing food aid and supplies to about 5000 families in the poor areas in villages of Latakia and Tartous and helping the Alwaites' families of the Syrian soldiers and forces.

In Aleppo, the up-scaling of these regular activities started with the appointment of *Mohamad Sabsabi* (Ziad's brother) as head of the branch of Youth and Development Party and head of AKF operations and humanitarian activities in Aleppo. Until recently, AKF's have served most of the Kurdish areas in Rural Aleppo, including the suburbs of Afrin and North of Syria, and the eastern areas, such as: Der-Jamal, Ramosa, Handarat camp, and the north of the city of Aleppo, including the towns of Andan, Huritan, Hayyan, Kafr Hamra, Bayanoun, Tal Maseibin, Yaqad Al Adas, and Aisha.⁷⁰

There were also coordination efforts between Russia and Chechens with the Kurdish forces in the north and north-eastern of

⁶⁸ Interview with a social worker with Nour Foundation office in Sehnaya (Rural Damascus), August 2018.

⁶⁹ Sputnik News, "Russia is with you ... with love" decorates the tables of the poor in Aleppo (in Arabic), 13 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/3ecUYdY>

⁷⁰ Mapping of activities had been conducted by reviewing the delivery reports between 2016-2020 of AKF operations and activities with local NGOs, as well as the posts of their operation on Facebook (see: Martyr Hajj Akhmad Kadyrov Charity Association: <https://bit.ly/3lYojfY>, and Akhmad Kadyrov Charity Association (2nd official page): <https://bit.ly/3nZdBaW>)

Syria since 2017⁷¹ including in rural Afrin, al-Hasakah, Qamishli and rural Aleppo. AKF's team supported the humanitarian units of the Russian Reconciliation Center (RRC) in several villages in the Kurdish regions and distributed clothes and food to more than 10,000 Syrian and Kurdish families (IDPs and residents)⁷² after the establishment of Russian checkpoints and sub-bases in the rural Afrin, Kobani and Manbij.

During 2019-2021, as the Russian forces were advancing in the Kurdish region after the Russian agreement with Turkey,⁷³ the Kadyrov Foundation began distributing relief materials and aid in the collective shelters of Hassaka and Qamishli to the displaced families of Ras al-Ain and Ain Issa.⁷⁴ As the Russian-backed Chechen military police were patrolling and helping with the withdrawal of Kurdish forces and YPG militias to 30 kilometres of the Syrian-Turkish border, supported the humanitarian operations of Russia.⁷⁵ Following the increasing presence of Russia in the Kurdish areas of north Syria during the last few months of 2020, the AKD's *Youth Volunteering Team* and *Youth Party's office* of Aleppo and Qamishli delivered and distributed

⁷¹ Berwin Ibrahim, "The efforts of the Youth Party for Building and Change to return the Russian citizens to their homeland, in cooperation with Senator Dr. Ziad Sebsby, and General Alexei Kim, representative of the Russian Ministry of Defense"(in Arabic), Facebook, 13 Nov 2017, 5:35 a.m., <https://bit.ly/3j6lZBZ>

⁷² Author mapping of AKF activities in Aleppo (2016-2020).

⁷³ Umut Uras, "Turkey, Russia reach deal for YPG move out of Syria border area", *Al-Jazeera*, 23 Oct 2019, <https://bit.ly/30YBQ03>

⁷⁴ 24 News Agency, "The 'Youth Party for Building and Change' holds a party to support displaced children in Qamishli", 30 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UY9sHI>

⁷⁵ Syrian News Agency, "The Ahmad Kadyrov Charitable Association provides food baskets and stationery to students of the Zaki Arsuzi School in Qamishli", 26 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/2CgJ455>

around 3,000 kits of school assistance, water, food supplies and blankets to the Kurdish IDPs.⁷⁶

With Russian forces gaining the upper hand in many areas and localities of Syria, AKF increased its humanitarian aid operations in Russian-controlled areas.⁷⁷ This outreach strategy may be seen as a purely humanitarian response, yet these high-visibility relief activities also reflect Chechnya's intention to support Russia's core military aims at local levels, and to gain community-based acceptance from Syrian Sunni populations. In this regard, most of Kadyrov Foundation's beneficiaries were concentrated in Sunni communities and returnees in 'reconciled' areas such as in Eastern Ghouta (delivering school kits and food-stuffs to the orphans and poor families in the towns Akraba, Harasta, Hamoria, Douma), in Eastern Aleppo and rural Aleppo (this include targeting IDPs in mosques, schools and shelters during the Aleppo Offensives in 2016/17, as well as Ramadan and Muslim Festivals in 2019 and 2020). Notably, in 2020, RRC regularly commissioned AKF and local partners (National Youth Party and Nour Foundation) to target aid distributions in several areas in Eastern and Western Damascus (for example Duma and Al Kiswa), Daraa and Rural Daraa, Sewidaa, Qunaitra, Hassaka, Qamishli, and rural areas of Aleppo.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Syria Youth Party (Blog), "The youth volunteer team provides support in the Qamishli countryside"(in Arabic), 11 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/2NdaM51>

⁷⁷ Charity Al Haj Ahmad Kadyrov, "The people of the Idlib countryside exited the crossings that were secured by the Syrian state and with the support of Russian friends #Abo Dhour_Exit of the civilians # Association of the martyr_Ahmad_Kadyrov# Support", Facebook, 11:07 a.m., 21 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/2BsHWv1>

⁷⁸ Mapping of activities had been conducted by reviewing the delivery reports between 2016-2020 of AKF operations and activities with local NGOs, as well as the posts of their operation on Facebook (see: Martyr Hajj Akhmad Kadyrov Charity Association: <https://bit.ly/31YojfY>, and Akhmad Kadyrov Charity Association (2nd official page): <https://bit.ly/3nZdBaW>)

According to the Chechnya president Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechen Ministry of Media, and local sources in Damascus and Aleppo, between 2017 and 2019, more than 2.5 million people benefited from Kadyrov humanitarian aid and access to food, clothing, blankets, and health supplies.⁷⁹ In 2019 the Foundation aid reached around 700 tons of bread and food, 200,000 blankets and around 25,000 schools kits to displaced children, orphans and families with disabled members and martyrs.⁸⁰

As a new modality of outreach to Syrian Muslims, several recovery efforts and donations have been subsidized by Chechnya.⁸¹ At the beginning of 2017, AKF announced pledges to rebuild two of the Syrian UNESCO World Heritage-listed sites and important mosques in Aleppo and Homs, which sustained heavy damages in the fighting.⁸² After the recapture of Aleppo by Assad and Russian forces, the first funding was for Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo.⁸³ Between 2017 and 2019, Kadyrov contributed \$14 million to rebuild and rehabilitate the landmark mosque of Aleppo. While in Homs, as it holds special importance for Sunni-Muslims and hosts the shrine of Khalid Ibn al-Walid, in 2017, Kadyrov Foundation sponsored the whole funding of the restoration of the Khalid Bin-Al-Waleed Mosque.⁸⁴ These developments deepened the religious partnerships between

⁷⁹ Chechnya news on the Islamic way channel (By Ramzan Kadyrov), “2020 Updated news about Ahmad Kadyrov Foundation activities in Chechnya, Somalia, Myanmar, and Syria”, Facebook, 8:09 a.m., 14 Feb 2020, <https://bit.ly/2ChMPXY>

⁸⁰ Interview with a member at the Charities Union in Damascus (اتحاد الجمعيات الخيرية في دمشق), November 2018

⁸¹ Enab Baladi, “The Minister of Religious Endowments for the Mufti of Chechnya: You are more precious than diamonds” (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/3ehqLKU>

⁸² Sputnik News, “Kadyrov Fund: Completion of the restoration of the Umayyad Mosque in Aleppo and Khaled Ibn Al-Walid in Homs in 2018” (in Arabic), 21 July 2017, <https://bit.ly/2TzORbO>

⁸³ Interview with former officer at the MOE, Sept 2020

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

Chechen senior officials, Syrian Endowments, and regime-supported Islamic institutions.⁸⁵ This coincided with delegations and constant contacts with the largest regime-supported Islamic institutes,⁸⁶ Abu al-Nour Islamic Education Complex and its affiliated colleges (Kuftaro Islamic Complex and Bilad Al-Sham University).⁸⁷ In February 2019, aiming for cultivating ties with Syrian institutions and Muslim leaders, Chechnya's chief mufti and senior Chechen religious leader came to Syria to inaugurate Khalid Ibn al-Walid mosque's reopening alongside Syrian Minister of Endowments (Abd Al-Sattar Al-Sayyid), Homs governor (Talal Barazi), the muftis of Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo.⁸⁸

At the same time, over the period between 2017 and 2020, reciprocal visits were repeated at ministerial and military levels.⁸⁹ Kadyrov's cousin and Moscow-based deputy head of Russian State Duma, Adam Delimkhanov, and the close Kadyrov ally

⁸⁵ Russia Today, "Kadyrov receives the Syrian Minister of Endowments at his headquarters in Grozny", 5 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/35NokP3>

⁸⁶ Syrian New Agency, "The Minister of Religious Endowments is discussing with the Mufti of Chechnya and Chechen delegation, strengthening scientific and religious cooperation between the two sides" (in Arabic), 24 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/3iZ1ZBU>

⁸⁷ Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro Complex - official page, "With the aim of consolidating cooperation between the scholars of the Levant and the scientific and advocacy institutions in the Islamic world, and in implementation of the directives of the Minister of Endowments in spreading the moderation and tolerance of Islam and fighting extremist ideology. A delegation of scholars of the Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro complex visited the Chechen Republic and the Republic of Dagestan from the Republics of the Russian Federation", Facebook, 24 January 2018, 8:55 p.m, <https://bit.ly/3627cFF>

⁸⁸ Russia Today, "The reopening ceremony of the historic Khaled Ibn Al-Walid Mosque in Homs", 21 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/2BKwmLG>

⁸⁹ Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro Complex - official page, "On Monday morning, 24/04/2017, a high-ranking religious delegation from the Republic of Chechnya visited the complex of Sheikh Ahmed Kaftaro, headed by Sheikh Salah Megiyev, Mufti of the Chechen Republic and his accompanying delegation, Sheikh Othman, Sheikh Sufyan, Sheikh Turku, and the engineer Sheikh Abdullah Al-Sayed Director Youth religious team and a number of team members", Facebook, 24 April 2017, 7:45 p.m, <https://bit.ly/3hVl3Qo>

Chechen Mufti Salakh-Hadzhi Mezhiyev, had met with President Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher al-Assad, the senior military commander.

New Brokers, Mobilizing Diaspora Networks, and Building Alliances in the North Caucasus

Russia reliance on diaspora and religious networks is not only limited to Chechniya: both Ingushetia and Dagestan also joined Russian-supported religious diplomacy, religious endowments partnerships, and humanitarian efforts in several areas of Syria.⁹⁰ In a similar way to the Chechen approach, during 2017, Ingushetia's humanitarian campaigns greatly increased and several distributions by Russia-backed Ingushetia's Police Forces took place in Eastern Ghouta and Aleppo.⁹¹ Following that, in 2017, Ingushetia-funded humanitarian operations started to be convened by the Russian-Syrian Business Council (RSBC), under the management of its General Director and Russian-supported Syrian-Ingush businessmen, Loay Al-Youssef. Officially, Al-Youssef is well-known as an advisor to the Head of the Republic of Ingushetia, and as one of Russian business arms in Syria, as well as a representative of the Republic of Ingushetia in Syria, and as representative of Russian World Union of Muslim Scholars as well.⁹² Similar to the Sabsabi case, Al Youssef's profile and affiliations as Syrian-Russian businessman reflected the Russian strategies of utilising and employing trusted brokers in Russian informal diplomacy.

Along these lines, between 2017 and 2020, both RSBC and Ingushetia's humanitarian mission held around 15 large-scale humanitarian distributions and campaigns during the month of

⁹⁰ CACI Analyst, "Ingush Police to support Chechen Units in Syria", 26 April 2017, <https://bit.ly/3wgvwAt>

⁹¹ Author observations in 2018 and interview with local humanitarian workers in Eastern Ghouta, July 2020.

⁹² Syrian New Agency, "Ingushetia honors 1000 families of martyrs and those affected by the terrorist war on Syria", 20 Nov 2018, <https://bit.ly/32Wzwat>

Ramadan, Mother's Day, and Prophet Muhammad's birthday.⁹³ With the facilitation and coordination with the Syrian Endowments and Social Affairs Ministries,⁹⁴ the distributions of food-stuffs, clothes, toys and school kits were held in the halls, tents and local stadiums, targeting hundreds of needy IDPs, the injured and families of martyrs.

Under the titles of "Tent of Ramadan and Goodness" and "with love from Ingushetia", these programmes and charitable gatherings were held several times in Rural Damascus (e.g. Eastern Ghouta), Aleppo, Homs, and Sewidaa. What distinguishes all these gatherings were the attendance and participation of Ingushetia's Police forces, Syrian businessmen, parliamentarians, and Ingushetia's Muslim representatives, accompanied by celebrations of the Republic of Ingushetia, with religious hymns and Ingush dances.

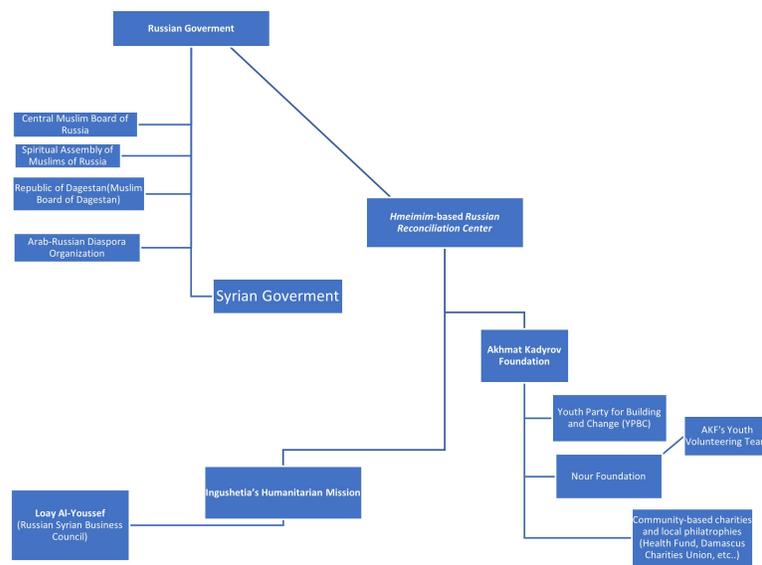
Thus, to sum up, as attempts to show solidarity within the Muslim communities, and by relying on Syrian figures as middlemen agents, diaspora networks, Chechen, Ingush, and Dagestan interventions have been serving Russia's interests. By building trusts and affiliations with the Sunni population in key Syrian affected governorates in Syria, these unprecedented levels of engagements in Syria are indicative of the broader Russian-supported strategies. These transnational actors, diaspora members, and local religious networks have become integral and consolidated platforms for Russian foreign policy, and as pillars of Russia's socio-political base in Syria (See Figure 2 for a summary of Russia-Caucasus networks in Syria). This takes place in a situation of Russia's increasing assertiveness and reach for political influence in Syrian communities and institutions. As will follow in

⁹³Sputnik News, "Dr. Luay Youssef "From Ingushetia, to mothers of heroes, with all love", 21 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/303rvyK>

⁹⁴"The Syrian Minister of Endowments receives the assistant and advisor to the President of the Republic of Ingushetia", *Russia Syria Business Council*, 1 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/3iZUbjh>

the next sections focusing on other cases, this approach has been applied by Russia in the same way, within the *Christian* community, intended to serve clear political, military, and influence-based objectives.

Figure 2: Architecture of Russian-Caucasus Networks in Syria



Mobilizing Russian Orthodox Church Soft Power in Syria

Support from the Russia’s Orthodox Church (ROC) for the Kremlin’s foreign policy and interventions in Syria, and the Patriarch of Russia’s (Kirill) visit to Bashar Al-Assad during 2011,⁹⁵ provides the context for Russia’s instrumentalization of the church’s soft power in Syria. Following Russia’s 2015 intervention, the Russian Orthodox Church has indeed supported the

⁹⁵ The Russian Orthodox Church - Department for External Church Relations, “His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with President of Syria Bashar al-Assad”, 13 Nov 2011, <https://bit.ly/3dqKpDy>

decision of Moscow as aiming to safeguard Syrian Christians and re-establish peace in the affected Christian areas of Syria.⁹⁶ As will be detailed in the next sections, these narratives have paralleled the growing role of Russia's Orthodox Church (ROC) in leading several humanitarian campaigns and fundraising efforts. Through coalitions of both Moscow-based NGOs and Russian politicians, and existing relationships with Patriarch John X, the Primate of the Greek-Orthodox Church of Antioch and All East (GOPA), the ROC has led the creation of a Russian-supported cluster around the Syria issue. With the appointments of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and all Russia⁹⁷ and Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, both close to President Putin, the ROC has become one of the most efficient instruments for propagating Russian interests in Syria and Lebanon⁹⁸ and in the regions that Moscow considers 'zones of influence'.⁹⁹

Christians in Syria make up about 10-12% of the population and the country's largest Christian denomination is the Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch (Greek Orthodox). Historical Orthodox relationships between the Syrian Orthodox community and the Russian Church date to the 19th century. The establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church in Damascus (St Ignatius Orthodox Church) during the 1970s¹⁰⁰ was an opportunity for the

⁹⁶ Cristina Maza, "Putin Vows to Rebuild Christian Syria, Restoring Churches and Bringing Refugees Home", *News Week*, Dec May 2017, <https://bit.ly/2V2v7OR>

⁹⁷ Agnia Grigas, "Beyond Crimea: the new Russian empire", New Haven; London; Yale University Press (2016)

⁹⁸ "Representative of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia to the Patriarch of Antioch takes part in Russian delegation's meeting with the President of Lebanon", Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations, 11 Feb 2017, <https://bit.ly/36Nocjg>

⁹⁹ Gatis Pelnens, "The Humanitarian Dimension of Russian Foreign Policy Toward Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and The Baltic States", Riga: Centre For East European Policy Studies (2010).

¹⁰⁰ Koutaiba Shihabi and Metri Haji-Athanasidou, "Churches of Damascus and Countryside (A Field Survey Including Documentational, Historical,

Kremlin to widen its influence on Syrian Christian Orthodox communities. From 2012, the ROC launched highly visible initiatives, including fund-raising for Syria's Christians among Russia-based dioceses, parishes, and monasteries.¹⁰¹

From 2012, the ROC has worked intensively on developing its presence and ties with important Syrian-Christian allies through its Representation Office. Its main partners on the ground are the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch; the Syriac Orthodox Church (SOC); and the Melkite-Greek Catholic Patriarch of Antioch in Aleppo. As GOPA and SOC strongly supported Assad's regime, both of them have enjoyed the full support of the Russian church, with funding flowing through their two charitable bodies: The *Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development* (DERD), which is the GOPA's charitable and development arm, and *St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee* (EPDC),¹⁰² that operate under the supervision of the SOC.¹⁰³ However, as a well-established NGO since the 90s and the largest Orthodoxy body, in Syria GOPA-DERD has been the main recipient and facilitatory of Russian funds and grants and has been the key partner for many ROC-supported NGOs, due to

Archeological and Etymological Account)", 2005, *Damascus Churches Encyclopedia*.

¹⁰¹ "Russian Orthodox Church sends money to Patriarchate of Antioch to help people affected by armed conflict in Syria", Serbian Orthodox Church, 8 August 2013, <https://bit.ly/3524GhK>

¹⁰² "Bishop Panteleimon of Orekhovo-Zuyevo meets with representatives of St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee of the Syriac Orthodox Church", *Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations*, 10 March 2016, <https://bit.ly/3d4My8f>

¹⁰³ Pravmir (Orthodox Christianity in the World), "Address by Metropolitan Hilarion on ROC and Aid to Christians of the Middle East", 23 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2X0IIBS>

personal strong ties between Patriarch John X and Patriarch Kirill.¹⁰⁴

The architecture of Russian Christian Networks in Syria:

In line with the ROC humanitarian efforts since the beginning of 2012, under the guidance of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the Department for External Church Relations and the Department for Church Charity, Russia's Church has supported several NGOs and charities to undertake operations in Syria. In this regard, the most prominent and largest Kremlin-connected one has been the *Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS)*. As Russia's major external "religious facilitator" for influence since 1882, the IOPS declares the main goal of its activities is to assist the ROC in its "spiritual, orthodox culture and peacekeeping activities" in Russia and the Middle East, as well as promotion of pilgrimages to the Holy Land.¹⁰⁵ Most importantly, the IOPS is chaired by the former minister of Russia's Federal Security Service *Sergei Stepashin*,¹⁰⁶ and by *Oleg Fomin*, as a high-profile member and head of IOPS's International Section, who was a former security official at KGB (Russian Intelligence Service) since 1965 and had worked from 1969 to 1975 as the head the Soviet Cultural Centre in Damascus.¹⁰⁷ He also heads the Committee for

¹⁰⁴ "His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with the Primate of the Orthodox Church of Antioch", *Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations*, 19 February 2015, <https://bit.ly/3d4N3z9>

¹⁰⁵ Information Resistance (Blog), "Hybrid "Crusade" of the Kremlin: The Imperial Palestinian Orthodox Society", 10 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/2V8zkjX>

¹⁰⁶ "IOPS Chairman" (in Russian), *Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society*, 14 June 2007, <https://bit.ly/2SVBWAt>

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Damascus-based Russian-speaking Syrian scholar, and review of Oleg Fomin biography and social media posts (*Oleg Fomin*, "Damask steel, my impression of the October 1973 war when I was a representative of the Federation of Friendship Societies with Foreign Countries and Director of the Soviet Cultural Center in Damascus and I became an eyewitness to this war, to the courage of Syrian civilians and military personnel, and to the

Solidarity with the Libyan and Syrian Peoples established in 2011,¹⁰⁸ and he is a well-known ex-Soviet figure and member of several Russian Military Veterans networks. Given their close ties to Post-Soviet Russian military and intelligence structures in the Arab region, both Stepashin and Fomin have participated in periodic Russian diplomatic visits to Syria and Bashar Al-Assad.¹⁰⁹ IOPS has been active in supporting Russian humanitarian operations to Syria since 2012.¹¹⁰ With the support from the Russian Orthodox Church, IOPS has been commissioned to deliver, manage, and organize humanitarian campaigns from Moscow to Syria, collecting donations, sending aid supplies, cargos and consignments to GOPA, in cooperation with key Syrian ministries and institutions.

Part of these deliveries and humanitarian campaigns have been implemented through the Russar Foundation, which was founded in 2014 by Fomin and a group of Syrian and Russian businessmen, diplomats, and professors. The prominent board's members, donors and founders include several Russian former security chiefs, such as the prominent nationalist politician Sergey Baburin and Alexandre Zotov, the former Russian ambassador to Syria, as well as the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan

strength of the Soviet-Syrian friendship”, Facebook, 5:12 p.m., 5 Oct 2020, <https://bit.ly/30P6NmA>)

¹⁰⁸ For Gaddafi and his people, “A Committee of Solidarity with the Peoples of Libya and Syria established in Russia” (in Russian), May 13 2011, <https://bit.ly/36Og1Di>. See also: “Russian politicians and academics: What Syria are facing is a big conspiracy”, *Syrian People's Assembly*, 20 Aug 2011, <https://bit.ly/3dfCM4e>

¹⁰⁹ “Russian official parliamentary delegation, representatives of the Moscow branch of the IOPS and the IOPS Public Center for the Protection of Christians in the Middle East visited Syria’s Leader”, *IOPS*, 2 January 2014, <https://bit.ly/31axfXY>

¹¹⁰ “We have a lot of joint projects”, EMERCOM of Russia, June 20, 2013, <https://bit.ly/31wx9BA>

Hilarion Alfeyev, and the EU-sanctioned Russian Syrian businessmen, Mudallal Khoury, Assad's moneyman in Russia.¹¹¹ Using diaspora networks and trusted Christian businessmen, the activities of both IOPS and the Russar activities in both Moscow and Damascus, increased significantly.¹¹² By 2017, the IOPS had opened its office in the Mariamite Cathedral in Damascus through an agreement with the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs, Syrian Endowments Ministry and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as the first registered Russian International organization in Syria.¹¹³ The IOPS's branch is headed by Patriarch John X as honorary chair, and operationally managed by the Syrian Dr. Matanyos Bashour.¹¹⁴ This step was followed by the opening of IOPS's membership in Syria, with partnerships and agreements between IOPS and local Christian NGOs, ministries, and Russian-supported figures in Syria,¹¹⁵ such as: the Syrian parliamentarians and Christian figures Maria Bitar and Dr Raymon Hilal (Step Charity), and the prominent defender of Assad regime, Mother Agnes Mariam, the head of Monastery of Saint James in Deir Attia (Rural Homs) and its affiliated charity MSJM.¹¹⁶

At higher levels, since 2014, ROC hierarchs and church aligned Russian politicians have coordinated and arranged visits to

¹¹¹ Author interviews and fieldwork with several Damascus-based Money Exchange businessmen, connected to Damascus-based businessmen Atiya Khoury (Mudallal's brother) during 2019.

¹¹² Russar, "IOPS and Russar Meeting in Damascus" (in Russian), 18 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3lxGx83>

¹¹³ Private source at the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs.

¹¹⁴ Syrian Arab News Agency, "Social Affairs Ministry, Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society sign MoU for humanitarian and educational cooperation" (in Arabic), 26 March 2017, <https://bit.ly/36FmFtv>

¹¹⁵ Syrian Arab News Agency, "The Ministries of Education, Health and Social Affairs discuss areas of cooperation with the Palestinian Orthodox Imperial Society" (in Arabic), 4 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/313A39R>

¹¹⁶ Interview with Christian humanitarian manger in Beirut, November 2019

Bashar Al-Assad and other senior Syrian officials.¹¹⁷ Along with the accelerated multiplication of ties and agreements between Syria and Russia between 2015 and 2016, the propagation of Russian ideologies continued and was developed by several Russia-based foundations and charities.¹¹⁸ As shown in the below figure, the most active ones include the Russian Military Veterans Brotherhood Organization (Combat Brotherhood), Foundation of St. Andrew, Russian Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Dr Liza Foundation, Spiritual Heritage of the Holy Apostle Paul Foundation, Russian International Business Islamic Association,¹¹⁹ and Military Training Academy of Vympel Foundation.¹²⁰

In this way, Russian clerics and bishops, humanitarian groups and members of government have been quietly cementing Syria ties in the framework of Russia's growing presence in different sectors and levels.¹²¹ As a result, ROC-supported campaigns, programmes and charitable efforts have been institutionalized by high-profile Russian politicians and ROC delegations to Syria.¹²² Among the high-ranking figures involved include *Sergei Gavrilov*, who is the coordinator of the Inter-Faction Deputy

¹¹⁷ Holy Land Foundation, "Russian delegation meets representatives of Churches and religious communities", Oct 28th 2015, <https://bit.ly/3iNbCTm>

¹¹⁸ The Brotherhood of War, "Delegation of The Combat Brotherhood at the School for the Children of Martyrs in Damascus" (in Russian), May 2015, Jun 2, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3jNilhF>

¹¹⁹ Arabi Today, "The Russian Islamic Center announces its activities in Syria next March", 27 Jan 2019, <https://bit.ly/3dd80cd>

¹²⁰ Candace Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare", *New America*, November 05, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2GQd2Qa>

¹²¹ "Syrian-Russian Parliamentary Friendship Committee", *Syrian People's Assembly*, 20 Oct 2018, <https://bit.ly/31AGh8a>

¹²² "Russian parliament members and public figures attend divine service at the church of Russian Orthodox Church Damascus Representation", *Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations*, 31 May 2015, <https://bit.ly/3c7Wc93>

Group for Protecting Christian Values and Head of Duma Committee for the Development of Civil Society and Religious Organizations, and *Dmitry Sablin*, who is one of the richest of Russia's Duma businessmen,¹²³ member of the Council of the Federation and United Russia Party, head of Syrian-Russian Parliamentary Committee, and deputy chairman of the Military Brotherhood Russian Veterans Organization (Combat Brotherhood). (Figure 3 summarizes of Russian Christian networks in Syria)

By around the end of 2016, in coordination with these foundations and NGOs, both ROC and Russian Interparliamentary Group has been commissioned and engaged in developing new forms of religious, educational, and Russian-led patriotic camps,¹²⁴ and humanitarian activities.¹²⁵ ¹²⁶ The most important vehicles of these organizations and programmes, are the utilisation of religious ties with Syrian Orthodox hierarchs,¹²⁷ and Syrian Endowments officials,¹²⁸ as well as political and

¹²³ Radio Free Europe, "Investigative Report: On the Trail of the 12 Indicted Russian Intelligence Officers", July 21, 2018, <https://bit.ly/35aKrgp>

¹²⁴ Rozana Radio, "Moscow invades the children of Syria militarily" (in Arabic), 16 Aug 2018, <https://bit.ly/3lyFqVM>

¹²⁵ Syrian Days, "Syrian-Russian cooperation in the medical field: Providing treatment for Syrian children in Moscow and visits of a Russian team specialized in cancer diseases", 18 Sept 2017, <https://bit.ly/36P7lwz>

¹²⁶ "Sergei Gavrilov: Bashar Al-Assad is interested in sharing of experience with Russia in development of civil society", *The State Duma*, January 18, 2019, <https://bit.ly/34Pc928>

¹²⁷ "On May 29, 2015, His Beatitude Patriarch John X of Great Antioch and All the East, at his residence in the Balamand Monastery, met with a delegation of Russian parliamentarians and public figures, including members of the IOPS", (in Russian), *Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society*, 31 May 2015, <https://bit.ly/2GIxX7G>

¹²⁸ Russia Patriarchia, "DECR chairman meets with Minister of Awqaf and Grand Mufti of Syria", 18 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/30WM6oy>

intergovernmental linkages with Syrian line ministries.¹²⁹ For example, since 2014, Syria's Endowment Minister, Mohamad Abd Al-Star Said, the Grand Mufti of Syria, and other clerics have been involved in many of these programmes,¹³⁰ partnerships,¹³¹ and activities implemented by ROC, IOPC,¹³² Russar and affiliated NGOs.¹³³ That has provided Russia and ROC opportunities of access to create new political ties as well as to consolidate existing relationships.¹³⁴

Taken together, and on the basis of information collected from interviews with several Damascus-based businessmen, Sheiks, and religious officials, who are connected to Hummeim-based Russian Centre, Atiya and Mudallal Khoury's networks in Damascus,¹³⁵ and GOPA, it can be said that all of these organizations have multiple commonalities in terms of members,

¹²⁹ Sputnik News, "The Syrian Minister of Transport is discussing with a Russian delegation the development of airports and maritime transport", 14 Jan 2019, <https://bit.ly/36ZDckF>

¹³⁰ "Syrian-Russian agreement signed by the Minister of Endowments", *Syrian Endowments Ministry*, 10 Sept 2014, <https://bit.ly/3707YU6>

¹³¹ Asharq Al-Awsat "A scientific cooperation agreement between the Syrian Endowments and the Mufti of Moscow", 19 Nov 2018, <https://bit.ly/2SM17Fc>

¹³² "The Supreme Mufti of Syria Badreddin al-Hassun met with the Honorary Member of the IOPS, Orientalist Mikhail Piotrovsky and examined the expositions in the Hermitage" (in Russian), Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, 11 June 2015, <https://bit.ly/3dsqNjJ>

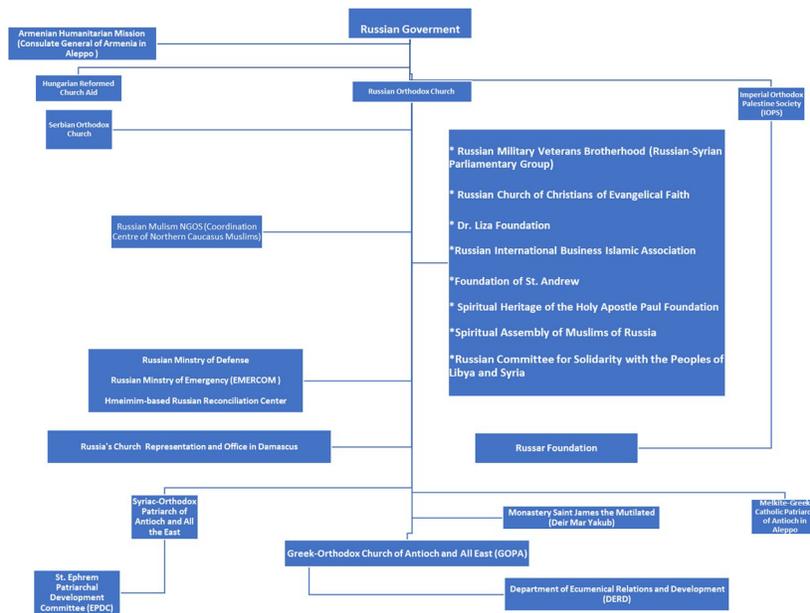
¹³³ Syrian News Agency, "Archbishop Hilarion: Russia is ready to do everything it can to make the reconstruction in Syria a success", 17 Nov 2018, <https://bit.ly/34TjWw3>

¹³⁴ "First consignment of humanitarian aid collected by Russian religious organizations was sent to Syria", *Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations*, 23 June 2017, <https://bit.ly/3da6OWg>

¹³⁵ OCCRP, "Laundering Misery: The Khouri Network's Global Reach", 13 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/33IWNgf>

funding, activities, structures, and ideology.¹³⁶ In particular, the overlapping of their memberships, statements, missions, campaigns and events, including the partnerships between their

Figure 3: Architecture of Russian-Christian Networks in Syria



programmes and activities in Syria—most obvious in the case of ROC, IOPS, Russian Humanitarian Mission, Spiritual Heritage of the Holy Apostle Paul Foundation, Military Training Academy of Vympel, Russian International Business Islamic Association Rusar, Veterans Brotherhood Organization.¹³⁷ These are

¹³⁶ Sputnik News, “The Russian Veterans Union announces the establishment of schools for the children of the martyrs in Syria”, 1 Feb 2019, <https://bit.ly/36Uej36>

¹³⁷ Rusar, “Visiting the “Combat Brotherhood” (in Russian), 06 Nov 2017, <https://bit.ly/3nynTPj>

all ways of legitimizing the actions of the Russian leadership in Syria, especially among the major stakeholders of Russian political and military ambition in Syria.^{138 139}

GOPA and the local Christian-based humanitarian INGOs:

Before going into detail on the activities of the Russian-supported programmes and activities, it's important to illustrate the emergence and weight of GOPA-DERD in Syria, as a Russian partner, as well as on the GOPA's key donors and affiliated organizations.

As a reinvigorated development arm of the Antiochian Orthodox Church (GOPA) in Syria, with unique external connections to Russia's Orthodox Church, GOPA-DERD has grown as a key local charitable 'implementer and humanitarian provider' in all government-held areas, including Northeast of Syria. As mentioned earlier, DERD is the largest local Christian faith-based NGO in Syria, facilitator and partner of Russian Churches and networks.¹⁴⁰ Its role grew in 2014 when Patriarch John X of GOPA entrusted DERD's leadership to *Archimandrite Alexi Shehadeh* after the removal and deposal of the 'moderate and secular' Christian figure 'Samer Al-Laham', who was the head of DERD-GOPA since 1996. Several sources indicated that Archbishop *Alexi Shehadeh* was appointed due to his strong ecclesiastical connections to the Russian Church and Patriarch John X, and readiness to adhere to GOPA's support of Assad and of Russian interests.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Russian Orthodox Church, "Interreligious delegation from Russia holds meetings with Syrian state leaders", 8 Feb 2018, <https://bit.ly/2IeCwXP>

¹³⁹ Russar, "The trip of our partners to Syria has ended" (in Russian), 25 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/33Zfg8t>

¹⁴⁰ "Russian Orthodox Church sends money to Patriarchate of Antioch to help people affected by armed conflict in Syria", *Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church to the European Institutions*, 16 August 2013, <https://bit.ly/3ebfnAc>

¹⁴¹ Interview with a Christian consultant and humanitarian official with UN-WFP in Homs, August 2019.

Gradually, since 2014, GOPA-DERD has been growing as one of the largest local NGOs, first and foremost, due to its direct relationships and coordination with Assad's Presidential Office, Russia's Orthodox Church in Moscow, and the Russian Embassy in Damascus. Compared to the restrictions imposed on the majority of local NGOs/INGOs and Islamic charities, the distinctive advantages that have been given to GOPA-DERD is the freedom from restrictions on grants and funding channels, and reporting requirements to the Ministry of Social Affairs (under Law 93). As a result, DERD as a Russian-supported NGO has been empowered to be the third biggest national partner and largest implementer of both UN and international programmes and activities.¹⁴² Since then, GOPA-DERD has established around 45 offices in government-held areas and the Christian areas in the Kurdish territories, with more than 40 community centres and 2400-2800 staff.

In terms of funding, GOPA-DERD operates several parts of its programmes from Russia's Orthodox Church donations, campaigns, grants, and in-kind supplies received from the Russian Church and its affiliated NGOs. On August 2013, GOPA-DERD received the first Russian Church funding channelled as a donation to the Patriarch John X of GOPA in Syria for an amount of around \$ 1.3 million.¹⁴³ Then, in the next few years, several humanitarian consignments and in-kind donations has been channelled to GOPA-DERD through several channels, including IOPS, Russar, and other Moscow-based NGOs.

¹⁴² The two largest Assad-supported and authorized bodies in Syria are: Syria Trust Foundation of Asmaa Al Assad and Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), who are exclusive national partners for all international NGOs and UN agencies.

¹⁴³ "Russian Orthodox Church sends money to Patriarchate of Antioch to help people affected by armed conflict in Syria", *Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church to the European Institutions*, 16 August 2013, <https://bit.ly/3ebfnAc>

Overall, between 2014-2020, GOPA-DERD implemented 17 programmes, serving both Muslim and Christian communities such as educational and schools projects, livelihood support and social development programmes, social protection and cash for work, Small Business Grants Program, Distributions Programs, Health and Psychosocial Support Program, Rents Support Program, Shelter, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Programs. For instance, in the affected Christian and Muslim areas in Homs and Hama, Damascus and Aleppo, GOPA-DERD had delivered foodstuffs and cash assistance to families and IDPs and provided low-income Christian and Muslim families with cash assistance to help with their monthly rent payments.¹⁴⁴

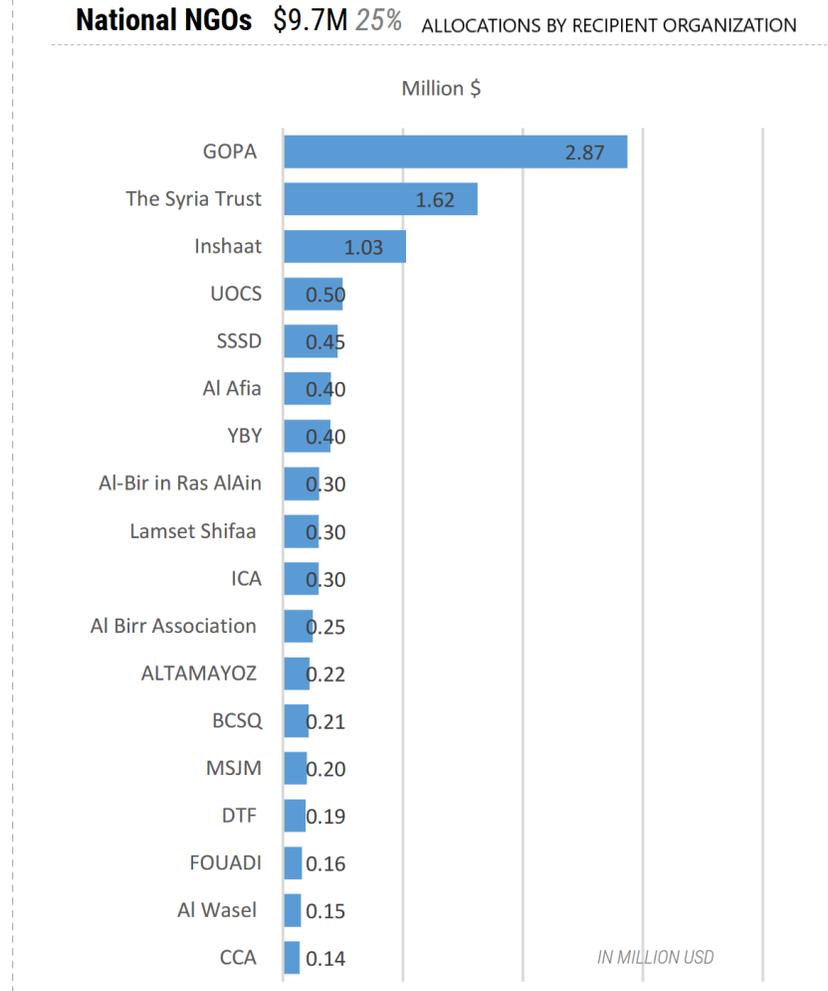
DERD relationships with UN agencies have been solidified in all the humanitarian programmes and development sectors. With full access to and authority in all the regime-held areas, it receives yearly funding from all the largest UN agencies (e.g., UNHCR, OCHA, UNFPA, UNICEF, WFP). For instance, in 2017, it was the main local beneficiary and fund recipient of the Syria Humanitarian Fund (SHF) of UN-OCHA (figure 4).¹⁴⁵ Additionally, the funding budget of 2018 for DERD from UNHCR totalled \$8,143,178 (USD), funded through the UNHCR-DERD's project: Infrastructure Rehabilitation, Multi-sectoral Protection Assistance for IDPs, Refugees and Returnees in Syria.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Interview with a Psychologist and Health Consultant with GOPA-DERD in Rural Damascus, September 2019.

¹⁴⁵ For previous or following years, the data and amount of funding are not published.

¹⁴⁶ Private source and internal documents from the UNHCR Head Office in Damascus (2020).

"Figure 4: UN OCHA Syria allocations of Syria Humanitarian Fund to local recipient organizations and charities"



In total, during the period between 2016-2019, the average annual funding inflow to GOPA-DERD has reached between \$ 23-27 million, received from many UN agencies, donations and grants from like-minded international Christian donors and

networks such as International Orthodox Christian Charities,¹⁴⁷ Aid to the Church in Need (Papal Foundation-ACN Network International)¹⁴⁸ and Action by Churches Together (ACT) Alliance.

In parallel with support from the Office of Bashar Al-Assad¹⁴⁹ for Christian-run activities¹⁵⁰, state officials have supported Russia-backed humanitarian networks and DERD by facilitating their access to areas, and implementations of projects and programmes in both Muslim and Christian-affected areas. This was accompanied by support from Assad-supported tycoons such as Khaled Houbabti (Head of Syrian Red Crescent - SARC) and Fares Klass (Christian Orthodox and the Director of Syria Trust for Development). Reflective of the Assad's regime's grip on the Syria humanitarian sectors,¹⁵¹ both SARC and *Syria Trust* have joined these networks as a national partner in many of their projects, with GOPA-DERD, EPDC and all the below mentioned INGOs and Christians donors (see Appendix I).

Lastly, it is noteworthy that this growing support to GOPA came after several meetings and appeals from Pope Francis and

¹⁴⁷ Pravmir (Orthodox Christianity in the World), “*International Orthodox Christian Charities Launches Campaign for Children’s Programs in Syria*”, 27 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/2B9oOlu>

¹⁴⁸ Eva-Maria Kolmann, “Catholics and Russian Orthodox collaborate to help Christians in the Middle East”, *Aleteia*, 24 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/2yJoCIU>. In 2018, ACN published one report about the persecutions of Christians in Syria between 2015 and 2017; Aid to the Church in Need, “Syria: Persecuted and Forgotten? A report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2015-17”, 1 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/2THqucg>

¹⁴⁹ Syrian News Agency, “President al-Assad with the Syrian-Syrian Catholic youth”, 04 July 2019, <https://bit.ly/2YjHvvV>.

¹⁵⁰ Jesr Press, “Asmaa Al-Assad celebrates Christmas with the students of Nizam Orthodox Armenian school”, 20 Dec 2019, <https://bit.ly/3hNfPY3>

¹⁵¹ Leenders, R. and Mansour, K. (2018), *Humanitarianism, State Sovereignty, and Authoritarian Regime Maintenance in the Syrian War*. Political Science Quarterly, 133: 225-257. doi:10.1002/polq.12773

Russian Patriarch Kirill in 2016,¹⁵² and from a convergence of concern about ‘Syria’s persecuted Christians’ between the Russian and Western churches.¹⁵³ Russia’s Orthodox Church has coordinated such efforts with like-minded emerging actors and Christian-based donors including several Vatican-supported NGOs, Czech Republic,¹⁵⁴ Hungary,¹⁵⁵ Serbia Orthodox Church,¹⁵⁶ and Armenia (Armenia Humanitarian Mission in Aleppo)¹⁵⁷, Moscow’s closest ally in the Europe.¹⁵⁸ These developments constitute potential , vehicles for some European normalization with Assad’s regime.

Areas of interventions, programmes, and projects:

This section gives some examples and details on the Russian-supported programmes and activities, that are implemented or/and funded by several Russian NGOs and networks:

Medical, relief, cash donations and food supplies: Russian-supported NGOs' activism in humanitarian and relief assistance range from cash and in-kind donations, Russian-made food-stuffs, medicines, to toys and school kits. As mentioned earlier, in addition to the ROC’s funding to GOPA, between 2012 and

¹⁵² Aleteia, “Catholics and Russian Orthodox collaborate to help Christians in the Middle East”, 24 Jul 2019, <https://bit.ly/2BtGdoU>

¹⁵³ Elisabeth Hellenbroich, “Hope after Seven Years of war for Syria: Reconstruction of Churches and Holy Places” *Rivista di Geocultura*, 5 June 2018, <https://bit.ly/3eoeMez>

¹⁵⁴ Interview with a Damascus-based Syrian businessman with connections to several officials at the Embassy of Czech Republic in Damascus, October 2019.

¹⁵⁵ Hungary Today, “Hungary Sending Aid to Syria”, 29 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/2yMcAyh>

¹⁵⁶ Balkan Insight, “Serbian Patriarch Sparks Controversy by Meeting Syria’s Assad”, 4 June 2019, <https://bit.ly/3eIovNh>

¹⁵⁷ Armen Press, “New group of Armenian humanitarian de-miners, medics dispatched to Syria”, 14 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3flxvY6>

¹⁵⁸ Hungary Today, “Putin in Budapest: Russia to further Deepen Ties with Hungary”, 31 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3eCvJSJ>

2016, Russar and IOPS have ostensibly organized humanitarian, medical aid and food to Syria. According to IOPS Middle East Working Group, IOPS and Russar sent around 16 consignments, amounting to over 200 tons of aid and food supplies and food-stuffs, including over 20 tons of flour and cereals, as well as around 30 tons of health equipment, supplies, and medicines. As well as around \$5 million (USD) as funding and donations from its fundraising campaigns in Moscow.¹⁵⁹

During the period before 2015, the delivery of humanitarian relief supplies had usually been delivered by the aircraft of the Russian Ministry of Defense and Russian Ministry of Emergency to GOPA-DERD, and officially handed to ROC's Office in Damascus, Syrian Endowments Officials, and Patriarch John X. For instance in 2013, the IOPS's assistance was sent to GOPA-DERD's affiliated churches and charities, that distributed it to displaced Armenians from the mountains of Latakia (Kassab town), and to support Christian IDPs who were displaced as a result of the clashes and battles between Jabhat Al-Nusra and Syrian regime forces, as well as to the affected Christians in different parts of Homs, Christian areas of Western of Damascus and its suburbs, and Christian villages in Rural Hama, such as Muharda and Al-Suqaylabiyah.¹⁶⁰

From 2013, health supplies and medically focused assistance have also been one of the components of the support, shipments, donations and in-kind supplies sent by both ROC, Russar, and IOPS. Part of these supplies were delivered during IOPS's delegations to the Syrian Ministry of Health and Ministry of Social

¹⁵⁹ Author calculations based on social media posts of IOPS, Russar and GOPA's activities and sources in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Latakia, and Rural Homs.

¹⁶⁰ Observations and discussions with several humanitarian officials and relief manager in Damascus, September 2019.

Affairs,¹⁶¹ and granted to the Children’s Hospital and Mujtahid Hospital in Damascus.¹⁶² However, in the Christian-majority areas of Rural Homs, the largest part of ROC-supported medical supplies to Syria was delivered to *Al-Hosn Patriarchal Hospital* in Rural Homs (Christians Valley), which is a non-profit hospital, affiliated with the Orthodox Church, that provides charity care. Through DERD’s Office in Homs and Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop George Abou Zakhem, in coordination with the Hmeimim-based RRC and Russian officials,¹⁶³ the hospital has been developed in terms of care services and capacity.

In the following years, with the Russian intervention in 2015 and establishment of Hmeimim-based RRC, Russian officials have supported ROC and IOPS,¹⁶⁴ in coordination with the Patriarch John X,¹⁶⁵ to reach and distribute aid for the affected families and Sunday schools in hard-hit regions in Rural Homs and Hama. Russian-run makeshift hospital, teams, and humanitarian units served several areas in the Christians Valley, such as Marmarita, Al-Hawash, Al-Husn, Al-Nasirah, and Al-Mishtaya.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ “Sergei Stepashin and Syrian Minister of Social Affairs Kinda al-Shammat discussed issues of humanitarian cooperation”, *Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society*, 6 April 2014, <https://bit.ly/2H1Xrgv>

¹⁶² “Children’s Hospital in Damascus provided aid collected by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society” (in Russian), *Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society*, 5 August 2013, <https://bit.ly/3iXccxZ>

¹⁶³ Syrian News Agency, “Russian medical aid to Al Hosn Patriarchal Hospital in Wadi Al-Nadara in the countryside of Homs”, 10 Sept 2016, <https://bit.ly/3j1z5QS>

¹⁶⁴ Tass, “Patriarch vows Russian Orthodox Church will continue to render assistance to Syria”, 5 Dec 2017, <https://bit.ly/2H5dji0>

¹⁶⁵ Pravmir (Orthodox Christianity in the World), “Patriarch John X of Antioch thanks the ROC for Rendering Aid to the Civilian Population of Syria”, 24 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/36BviFf>

¹⁶⁶ Based on author’s field work in Al-Mishtaya in 2018, and interview with Homs-based UN Humanitarian Manager in December 2019. See also: “Russian doctors examine patients in Al-Hosn hospital of the Orthodox Church of Antioch”, *Russian Orthodox Church*, 07 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/34XljJZ>

Other Russian Church-funded grants have contributed to the “Cash-based assistance schemes and house rent assistances” implemented by the local churches and community centres of GOPA, EPDC, MSJM in Rural Damascus, Hassaka, Rural Homs, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia that aimed to support the displaced Christian communities of Rural Latakia, Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta and Rural Homs. In coordination with these local NGOs, these grants have also funded small projects for medical support, rehabilitation assistance to Christian returnees and Church’s orphanages in Maaloula, Rural Homs, Aleppo and Eastern Ghouta, as well as to the Syriac, Armenian, and Orthodox sects in the Syriac and Armenian neighbourhoods in Hasaka, Qamishli, Aleppo, Homs and Rural Homs (e.g., Al-Kusair).¹⁶⁷

As a result of these efforts and developments, the period between 2017 and 2020 witnessed a growing number of Russian-supported humanitarian initiatives and medically focused programmes,¹⁶⁸ convened and coordinated by both Russia’s Church, Russar (Oleg Fomin), IOPS, and GOPA (Patriarch John X).¹⁶⁹ One of them is the “Inter-religious Working Group for Aid to People in Syria”, that was established in 2017 under the supervision of Russia’s Presidential Council for Cooperation with several Russia-based Muslim and Christian Organizations.¹⁷⁰ Around 80 tons of humanitarian supplies were distributed in several areas of Syria, directly by RRC and Russian Military forces

¹⁶⁷ Observations and meeting with DERD officials and volunteers in Eastern Ghouta, Homs and Latakia(2019).

¹⁶⁸ “Medical doctors on humanitarian mission to Syria visit Damascus representation of Russian Orthodox Church”, *Russian Orthodox Church*, 12 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/36XjMWW>

¹⁶⁹ "Sergei Stepashin and Patriarch John X of Antioch and All the East discussed issues of further development of humanitarian cooperation" (in Russian), Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, 30 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/3dhv8GI>

¹⁷⁰ Pravmir (Orthodox Christianity in the World), “*Second consignment of humanitarian aid collected by Russian religious organizations delivered to Syria*”, 26 August 2017, <https://bit.ly/36HQ6Lp>

to IDPs. As a way for communication and outreach at the community levels, the number of these consignments in 2018 and 2019 grew significantly.¹⁷¹ On the ground, from February 2018, these groups conducted around three small-scale humanitarian distributions and campaigns in several areas in Damascus, jointly with representatives of different Syrian religious communities and sects (Sunni, Druze, Christians, Armenians and Al-waitees), including the Grand Mufti of Syria (Ahmad Badruddin Hassoun), Syrian Endowments Minister, GOPA's officials, with Russians Muslim and Christian leaders. Under the title of "Rendering aid to the Syrian people and Solidarity" this working group has organized several high-profile meetings in Damascus, accompanied by humanitarian distributions to both Muslims and Christians in several areas in Rural Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Rural Homs¹⁷², with several cargos of humanitarian supplies granted to local charities in Eastern Ghouta, churches and mosques.¹⁷³

In the context of Russia's military-led activism in humanitarian and relief in the recaptured Syrian territories (e.g. Aleppo, Homs and Daraa),¹⁷⁴ from 2015, other ROC-connected organizations such as *Russian Humanitarian Missions and Military Brotherhood*, and *Russian Veterans Organization* (Combat Brotherhood) also jointly supported *Russar* and Hmeimim-based Russian Centre (RRC) in delivering humanitarian aid, children's clothes, gifts and foodstuffs to several crisis-affected Christian

¹⁷¹ "Representatives of religious communities of Syria and Russia meet in Damascus", *Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations*, 14 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/3gw1mz6>

¹⁷² Pravmir (Orthodox Christianity in the World), "Interreligious Delegation from Russia Distributes Humanitarian Aid among Citizens of Syrian Capital", 06 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/2yDcM2M>

¹⁷³ Pravmir (Orthodox Christianity in the World), "Russian Church to Help Syria Return to Peaceful Life – Patriarch Kirill", 20 September 2018, <https://bit.ly/2M48dBJ>

¹⁷⁴ "More than 800 thousand Syrians receive Russian humanitarian aid", Russian Ministry of Defense, 27 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/2GXrm9q>

communities in Syria, as well as parishioners, Orthodox orphanages, Syrian Army's veterans and families.¹⁷⁵ In this regard, between 2015 and 2020, the representatives of both Russian-backed Syrian local charities, *Russar*, *Military Brotherhood* *Russian Veterans Organization* organized and supervised these activities in several "Schools for the Children of the Martyrs" in both Damascus and Latakia.¹⁷⁶ Between 2016 and 2020, the *Russian Veterans Organization*, together with Russian Forces, sponsored several children and parishioners-targeted campaigns, including distributions of foodstuffs, toys and school supplies, in several Orthodox Churches of Latakia,¹⁷⁷ in the Christian-majority areas of Al-Zabadani in Rural Damascus (Bloudan), and in the areas that were hit and targeted by ISIS and Islamic rebel forces, such Al-Qaryatayn in Rural Homs, Maharda and Al-Saqilibia in Rural Hama,¹⁷⁸ and in Maaloula in Rural Damascus.¹⁷⁹

During the last few years humanitarian assistance had focused on medical needs. Through IOPS and *Russar*,¹⁸⁰ several batches of medical and humanitarian aid have been handed officially by

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Damascus-based humanitarian worker and activist, October 2020. See also: The Brotherhood of War, "Delegation of The Combat Brotherhood at the School for the Children of Martyrs in Damascus" (in Russian), May 2015, Jun 2, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3jNilhF>

¹⁷⁶ "IOPS gifts donated to Syrian children who lost their parents in the war", Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, 21 January 2019, <https://bit.ly/3nBQp2n>

¹⁷⁷ Orthodox Christianity (blog), "2,500 Syrian children receive gifts from Russian "Combat Brotherhood", October 27, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2H2HE0H>

¹⁷⁸ Interfax Religion, "Russia conveyed 1.5 tons of humanitarian aid to residents of a Christian city in Syria", 26 APRIL 2017, <https://bit.ly/3VuJrx6>

¹⁷⁹ Author field work and mapping of areas of interventions during 2019. See also: Serbian Orthodox Church, "Church-state delegation visits Syria", 15 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3IJvmcB>

¹⁸⁰ Syrian Arab News Agency, "The Ministries of Education, Health and Social Affairs discuss areas of cooperation with the Palestinian Orthodox Imperial Society" (in Arabic), 4 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/313A39R>

Russian officials and Military Forces to several governmental hospitals and Syrian authorities: such as Aleppo University Hospital, Damascus Hospital and Latakia (Latakia National Hospital),¹⁸¹ and to Christian-run hospitals in rural Hama (Hama National Hospital) and Rural Homs.¹⁸² With the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, the Syrian Ministry of Health received small-size batches of medical assistances from RUSSAR and IOPS, that included some COVID-19 test kits, protective suits, and medicines.¹⁸³ The Center for Pediatric Prosthetics and Rehabilitation at the Representation of the Russian Orthodox Church in Damascus, Syria was established in 2022.¹⁸⁴

In conclusion, it is important to note that, Russian NGOs humanitarian assistance and supplies when compared to the efforts and funding of both Syrian local NGOs and EU-funded INGOs in regime-held areas, were mostly limited, not regular, symbolic, and always aiming for supporting Russia's long-term targets and to achieve a very specific objective in each targeted area, community, and age.

Christian landmarks: Reconstruction and Religious Support: From around 2016 and after the defeat of ISIS, Russia's Orthodox Church has taken the lead in developing and advocating for reconstruction and restoration efforts of war-damaged Christian

¹⁸¹ Russar Charitable Fund, "Russar sends a new batch of medical aid to Syria, eight intensive care equipment were delivered to Al Mujtahed Hospital in Damascus on March 7, 2018", Facebook, 5:35 p.m., 7 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/354Vat4>

¹⁸² In Syria (Blog), "The Palestinian Orthodox Imperial Society is preparing for a mobile medical center" (in Arabic), 04 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/2BpkK0y>

¹⁸³ "The transfer of humanitarian aid to the IOPS to the Ministry of Health of Syria took place" (in Russian), Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, 24 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/3jOafQQ>

¹⁸⁴ "Center for Pediatric Prosthetics and Rehabilitation is opened at the Russian Orthodox Church Representation in Damascus", Russian Orthodox Church, 7 March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3s3ut3y>

areas, Churches, and historical sites.¹⁸⁵ Under the efforts made by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow,¹⁸⁶ IOPS and the Metropolitan Hilarion, with the Russian government,¹⁸⁷ joint pledges have sponsored and funded rehabilitation of several war-damaged Orthodox churches, schools and monasteries in several areas of Syria. These include,¹⁸⁸ the following:

- 1- Saint George Church for the Greek Orthodox in Arbin (Eastern Ghouta - Rural Damascus).
- 2- Greek Orthodox Church of Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God (in the war-damaged parts of Zabadani town of in Rural Damascus).¹⁸⁹
- 3- St Thecla Maaloula Patriarchal Monastery (Ma'lula - Northeast of Rural Damascus)

¹⁸⁵ Syrian Arab News Agency, "Putin: Russian Orthodox Church's contribution to rebuilding cultural and spiritual centers in Syria is essential", 1 December 2017, <https://bit.ly/3elYRx8>, Russian News Agency, "Russian Orthodox Church, Vatican team up to rebuild Christian sites in Syria", 7 JUL 2018, <https://bit.ly/2TDkotg>

¹⁸⁶ Orient News, "Russians look to strengthen bonds with Syria's Orthodox Christians", 25 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3enTTAh>

¹⁸⁷ Author interview with businessmen, several locals in Rural Damascus and a Christian humanitarian worker in these places and locations of Rural Damascus and Aleppo, see also: Pravmir (Orthodox Christianity in the World), "*Orthodox Monastery Being Repaired, Expanded in Syrian city of Saidnaya*", 23 August 2019, <https://bit.ly/3erfwzs>

¹⁸⁸ "Orthodox Church of Antioch receives aid from Russia for restoring churches in Syria destroyed during the hostilities", Russian Orthodox Church, 30 November 2018, <https://bit.ly/374SbmW>

¹⁸⁹ Author field work in Al-Zabadani, in 2020 (Oct) and during 2019. The church was built in 1835 and when it was burned in the "year of Al-Tousha" in 1860 (Syria and Lebanon), it was restored and roofed with bricks in 1925 with the efforts and assistance of the Russian Consul in Damascus, and the restoration was completed in 1928. The church contains some old manuscripts, the oldest of which date back to 1693, and it contains valuable old icons, the most important of which is the icon "The Lady's Dormition" From 1859. (For more information see Father Dr. Mitri Haji Athanasio, *Monasteries and Churches of Damascus and its Countryside (Field Study Archaeological Historical Documentation)*, Damascus, 2005, pp. 184-186).

- 4- Our Lady of Saidnaya Patriarchal Monastery (Qalamoun region to the north of Rural Damascus)
- 5- A new Orthodox church to be built in Aleppo City (reportedly in the Al-Furkan neighbourhood), by the Russian NGO: Spiritual Heritage of the Holy Apostle Paul Foundation.

Saydnaya Patriarchal Monastery and *St Thecla Ma'lula Patriarchal Monastery* are the one of the world wide centres for Christian pilgrimage.¹⁹⁰ All of these sites both religiously and politically important for Russia's influence and positioning efforts in Syria¹⁹¹ to build ties with the Christian Orthodox hierarchies in Damascus and other areas. The IOPS also started organizing trips and religious programmes for Russian pilgrims and scholars to Christian landmarks in several areas in Syria, including cultural and educational activities with Syrian Churches.^{192 193}

In parallel, starting from 2015, after the recapture of Palmyra in 2016 by the Russian forces¹⁹⁴ Russian-funded projects to restore and rehabilitate the National Museum of Palmyra and Palmyra's archaeological sites, were undertaken through partnership of the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the Institute for the History of Material Culture of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Syrian Directorate General of

¹⁹⁰ Monasteries of Antiochian Orthodox Patriarchate, (Lebanon: University of Balamand Publications, 2007).

¹⁹¹ "Primate of the Church of Antioch meets with members of the Russian parliamentary delegation", *Russian Orthodox Church. Department for External Church Relations*, 22 January 2014, <https://bit.ly/36HPqpl>

¹⁹² Syria 24, "Pilgrimages trips to holy places in Syria organized by the Palestinian Orthodox Society", 26 Dec 2019, <https://bit.ly/36SGgbx>

¹⁹³ "The Imperial Orthodox society has developed a program for the conservation of cultural heritage in Syria" (in Russian), Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, 6 October 2015, <https://bit.ly/30S6mry>

¹⁹⁴ Deutsche Welle, "Russia declares Syria's Palmyra free of landmines", 21 May 2016, <https://bit.ly/3nU4ecH>

Antiquities and Museums, during 2019.¹⁹⁵ These programmes coincided the investment's agendas and partnerships between the Syrian Ministry of Tourism and IOPS,¹⁹⁶ with Russian tour operators arranged and supported by Russian Syrian Business Council (RSBC).¹⁹⁷

Educational Programmes and Youth-based Military-patriotic Camps: Another important element of Russian linked NGOs is their involvement in supporting Russian language programmes, camps, and school programs.¹⁹⁸ The first step in this undertaking was a 2014 convening by the St. Andrew Foundation and ROC, of a camp in Moscow for children of Syrian regime loyalist veteran families and Orthodox orphanages.¹⁹⁹ Then, under the patronage of President Putin in 2016, Russia organized patriotic summer camps for hundreds of veterans' children from several countries, including Syria.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ Moscow Times, "Russia, Syria Agree to Restore Ancient Palmyra", Nov 2019, <https://bit.ly/30OwLXl>

¹⁹⁶ Syria in, "During his visit to Moscow, Russia the Syrian Minister of Tourism is meeting with the head of IOPS", 10 Sept 2019, <https://bit.ly/2GSJwJ8>

¹⁹⁷ According to private sources in Damascus, several meeting held during the period between 2016 and 2019 between the RSBC and Syrian Tourism Ministry to launch the "Syrian days in Moscow" tourism programme for Russians and pilgrims. In 2020, these agreements started to take place and develop. See, Cham Times, "Chambers of Tourism" and "Syrian-Russian" discuss the revitalization of tourism", September 25, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Igjlhi>

¹⁹⁸ Ruslan Trad "Russia's Youth Strategy for Syria", Medium, <https://bit.ly/3wlZzVm>, Apr 13, 2019.

¹⁹⁹ Syria News Agency, "Yakunin: Hosting the children of the Syrian martyrs is an expression of friendship between Syria and Russia", 3 August 2014, <https://bit.ly/3kaqxbT>

²⁰⁰ News Week, "Russia Opens Patriotic Military Summer Camp Under Putin's Patronage", 16 June 2016 <https://bit.ly/3drJQLn>

The Russian language has become the "second language" taught in Syrian schools in 2014,²⁰¹ promoted by Russian agreements signed with the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education and public universities in 2016,²⁰² Russia has sponsored Military and Patriotic education for veterans' children in 2018.²⁰³ These programmes are reportedly funded and organized by Vympel (also known as Vega Group),²⁰⁴ which is known to be affiliated with the Russian Security services, including the KGB Higher Red Banner Training Academy and higher school.²⁰⁵ the Russian Military Veterans Brotherhood Organization (with the Russian and Syrian embassies in Moscow) is another of the Russian hosting organizations²⁰⁶ that has been heavily involved in these programmes.²⁰⁷ This goes alongside with a presidential decree in 2017 from Bashar Al-Assad to give IOPS government-owned lands in Rural Damascus for Russian and IOPS's educational projects.²⁰⁸ There has also been close coordination between the Russian War Veterans Associations and the Union of Old Syrian

²⁰¹ The agreement was signed in 2014, according to a source at the Syrian Ministry of Education, see also: Syria News Agency, "Teachers and students to be dispatched to Russia to boost Russian language learning", 10 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/31eWoR1>

²⁰² Syria News Agency, "A Russian delegation proposes training support to Damascus University's Russian Language Department", 9 April 2016, <https://bit.ly/3o5VZUm>

²⁰³ Rozana Radio, "Moscow invades the children of Syria militarily", 16 Aug 2018, <https://bit.ly/3lyFqVM>

²⁰⁴ Interview with a former business partner of

²⁰⁵ Candace Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare", *New America*, November 05, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2GQd2Qa>

²⁰⁶ The Brotherhood of War, "Patriotic Education of Youth", 2015 - 2020, <https://bit.ly/33lPh5c>

²⁰⁷ The Brotherhood of War, "Children of Heroes" was held in the Tula Suvorov Military School", 26 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/30Tg6Sn>, see also: Vecherniy Stavropol, "Education of patriots at the forum "Donuzlav-2015", 27 July 2015, <https://bit.ly/3lwPpe3>

²⁰⁸ Sputnik News, "Decree of President al-Assad allocating "land" to build a Russian school in Damascus", 04 May 2017, <https://bit.ly/37j9zEy>

Warriors. By 2019, the Crimea-based Military-patriotic camps were being run for Syrian children,²⁰⁹ and the Russian Military Veterans Brotherhood launched a project to open a school for the children of Syrian martyrs.²¹⁰ Overall, the compilation of these arrangements via multiple military-based structural, NGOs, and intergovernmental channels, are pointing to the Russian intentions to forge close ties with Syrian military and political elites.

The War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Russian Soft Power in Syria:

Lastly, it's important to conclude with an analysis of how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has affected the activities of Russian NGOs and missions.²¹¹ The cultural activities,²¹² delegations and visits of several Russian politicians, representatives, and figures have not stopped.²¹³ For example, Dmitry Sablin, the richest Russian businessman and politician in charge of ties with the allied government in Damascus still regularly visited Al

²⁰⁹ Sputnik News, "Syrian children in the Crimea", 17 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/3nG073E>

²¹⁰ Sputnik News, "The Russian Veterans Union announces the establishment of schools for the children of the martyrs in Syria", 1 Feb 2019, <https://bit.ly/36Uej36>

²¹¹ Syria News Agency, "Cooperation agreements inked between Tishreen University and a number of Russian universities", 17 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3D0lJBJ>. See also: Syria News Agency, "Syrian-Russian talks on fostering cooperation in vocational education and Russian language teaching", 17 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3SfTjbq>

²¹² Syria News Agency, "Syrian media delegation holds interactive dialogue with representatives of Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry", 11 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3eArpc7>

²¹³ Syria News Agency, "A festive atmosphere at Umayyad Square in preparation for celebrating Russian Flag Day", 17 Aug 2022, <https://bit.ly/3MGkt9Z>. See also: Syria News Agency, "Russian coordination center delivers artifact to Damascus National Museum from Assyrian era", 4 Sept 2022, <https://bit.ly/3D4V4U8>

Assad and Syrian officials, most recently in July 2022.²¹⁴ The most important change was the meetings that took place between the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Donetsk People's Republic, Nataliya Nikonorova, with a Syrian parliamentary committee and many Syrian officials and ministers. The Assad regime officially announced the recognition of Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR), which made Syria the first country besides Russia to formally recognise the two parts of Ukraine as independent republics.²¹⁵

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian undertook²¹⁶ mobilisation of Orthodox Church,²¹⁷ and use of humanitarian aid generate soft power in Ukraine in a way similar to that in Syria.^{218 219}

²¹⁴ Syria News Agency, "Sabbagh to Sablin: Syrian –Russian parliamentary relations are permanently developing", 14 June 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Twt95b>

²¹⁵ Syria News Agency, "President al-Assad to a joint delegation from Russia and the Donetsk Republic .. Syria and Russia are fighting one battle against one enemy", 16 June 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Cxcmyr>

²¹⁶ "Russian regions help provide timber to the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics as humanitarian assistance", Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 14 June 2022, <https://bit.ly/3VCrHzR>

²¹⁷ "Holy Synod members discuss the issue of rendering aid to refugees and suffering civilians in Ukraine", Russian Orthodox Church, 24 March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3MDMhMi>

²¹⁸ "Religious communities in Russia collect humanitarian aid for people in Donbass", Russian Orthodox Church, 9 April 2022, <https://bit.ly/3yNI7fb>, See also: teleSUR, "Russia Increases Delivery of Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine", 14 March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3S9BF8S>

²¹⁹ Russian News Agency TASS, "Over 25,000 people evacuated from Ukraine, DPR, LPR to Russia in past day", 29 Jul 2022, <https://bit.ly/3yL5QMS>, See also: Russian News Agency TASS, "Russia's emergencies ministry deploys 3 mobile community notification systems in Mariupol", 26 May 2022, <https://bit.ly/3exDsai>

Conclusion:

In Ukraine, as in Syria, Russia's soft power is taking a microtargeting strategy, as Marlène Laruelle argues,²²⁰ wherein rather than trying to reach a broad audience, it focuses, instead on selected well-identified constituencies whose features predispose them to respond favourably. This was clearly reflected in the undertakings surveyed in this study.

These strategies of niche soft power include exploiting Russia's history, religion, culture, business, the Soviet legacy, Russia's current governance and ideology. Using historical relationships, diaspora, ethnical, and religious networks, or anti-Western narratives, Russia's strategy is growing on developing its influence in what is already a potential pro-Russian and supportive space.

While the extent to which Russia has succeeded in developing convincing narratives is not yet clear the resources and instruments deployed and the targeting micro-audiences who are either favourable to Russia or disconnected and disenfranchised from liberal values, seems to have a certain cumulative power of influence.

Russian outreach to both Muslim and Christian communities, includes a broad and complex array of approaches through the Russian-backed NGOs. While an extension of its hard power, Russia's soft power in Syria rests not so much on a vertical authoritarian power than on maintaining and building its own grid of local elites, diaspora, religious and political groups.

In terms of Russia's strategic interests, these activities aim to strengthen state-level diplomatic relationships. In the long term, such activities have been opening the doors of Syrian economic elites, warlords, ministries, religious and public figures to

²²⁰ Marlène Laruelle, "Russia's Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets and Channels of Influence", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 122, Ifri, April 2021

representatives of Russian-supported actors and institutes. The Syrian actors use their capabilities to uphold the Kremlin's position in Syria, in return for Russian support. Western views of the limits of Russian power in Syria,²²¹ and claims that how Russia has been unable to institutionalize its presence, neglects the weight of the dense networks the ties between Russia and a part of the Syrian population.

In other words, as toolkits for an ambitious strategy, Russian-supported organizations, diaspora, parties and humanitarian campaigns, funding, and religious institutes have succeeded to a certain extent in generating soft power manifest in local networks, and influence instruments. The outreach to and mobilising of diaspora networks, ethnic and tribal leadership, religious and church networks, has given Russian officials greater linkages and leverage at community and regional levels, that are helping Russia in achieving its long-term political goals in Syria.

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²²¹ Anton Mardasov and Kirill Semyonov, "Russia without Assad", *Riddle*, 15 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/2XdpOxo>

Appendix I

Christian-based INGOs, networks and donors in the government-held areas of Syria, who are operate and fund local Christian-based NGOs between 2016-2020:

Name of INGOs	Implementer/ local partner
MECC - The Middle East Council of Churches	GOPA and EPDC
International Orthodox Christian Charities.	GOPA (8,221,259 \$ in 2018)
Action by Churches Together Alliance (ACT)	GOPA
Cordaid - Catholic Organization for Relief and Development Aid.	GOPA and Syria Trust
Finn Church Aid (Finland)	GOPA
United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)	GOPA
Norwegian Church Aid	GOPA, Syria Trust and SARC
Lutheran World Relief	GOPA and Syria Trust
Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe Deutschland	GOPA and Syria Trust
European Christian Organizations for Relief and Development - EU-CORD Network	GOPA
Caritas International	GOPA and other Faith based local NGOs
Tearfund (British Christian-based INGO)	Syria Trust and GOPA
Dutch Relief Alliance	GOPA
Dorcas	Syria Trust and GOPA
Swiss Church Aid (HEKS/EPER)	GOPA and Syria Trust
ZOA International	GOPA and Syria Trust
Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (**Hungarian Embassy in Damascus in coordination with Russia Officials)	Local Christian NGOs
Danish Church Aid	GOPA
Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches	GOPA
Barnabas Funds	EPDC
Christian Solidarity International	GOPA and EPDC

Source: author fieldwork, observations with GOPA and Syria Trust, and meetings with GOPA and EPDC's officers in Damascus, Rural Damascus, Sewidaa, Daraa and Latakia in the period between 2018-2022