

Title of paper : Activities of the Palestinian-Russian Organization yesterday, today and tomorrow

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Russia has always been interested in the Middle East, not only because of its geographical proximity and Russia's desire to develop political and mutually beneficial trade relations, but also because of the spiritual component. In 988 Russia adopted the Christianity of Eastern tradition (Orthodox Christianity) as its state religion, and pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other Palestinian cities became widespread.

In 1882 the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS) was founded, which enjoyed the support of the authorities of the Russian Empire. Hotels and monasteries for the reception of pilgrims from Russia were built in Palestine, as well as more than 100 schools and a number of teachers' colleges for training teachers for these schools as the charity aid. The most famous one was located at Beit Jala, a city placed close to Bethlehem. The infrastructure for receiving pilgrims, supporting the charity's work as well as for conducting studies on the biblical history, established by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, was called the "Russian Palestine".

All subjects at those schools were taught in Arabic and Russian according to the programs drawn up in Russia. Translation of Russian classics such as Pushkin, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky and other authors was arranged. Jerusalem and Palestine became one of the favorite themes of Russian folk poetry and works of Russian poets and writers.

The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 led to a reduction of the IOPS's activity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the IOPS made its work more active and established eighteen offices in Russia and abroad. Since 2007 Sergey Stepashin, the head of the Accounts Chamber of the Russian



Federation, Professor, and Doctor of Law is the Chairman of the IOPS.

Due to the efforts of the Board of the IOPS headed by S. Stepashin and with the active support of Russia's official circles the Sergievsky Compound in Western Jerusalem, built with the funds of the IOPS, was returned to Russia by Israel at the end of 2009. The Russian government allocated funds for restoration of this historic compound, where Russian organizations, which develop relations with the Arab population of Palestine regardless of their religious affiliation, will be placed. In early 2010, the construction of a museum complex in Jericho was completed, in the opening ceremony of which the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev participated. The museum was built with the funds of Russia on the land lot bought by Russia in the last century. Nowadays the construction of cultural and business center of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society has begun in Bethlehem on the land lot handed over by the Palestinian National Authority. The construction is financed by the Russian party. The IOPS plans the construction of Russian school with the funds allotted by Russian business companies.

The revival of the IOPS's activity is accompanied with the process of translating textbooks, various teaching aids, children's literature. We believe that this work contributes to strengthening friendship and mutual understanding between peoples, facilitates dialogue among cultures and civilizations.