

Patriarch Praises Russians' Return to Holy Land

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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On his first official visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories, Patriarch Kirill praised the return of large numbers of Russian Orthodox pilgrims to the Holy Land and discussed the believers' role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Politics thwarted pilgrims during the Soviet era, but now "a wall has come down" and hundreds of thousands of people from the former Soviet Union are visiting the region's holy sites, he told a crowd of hundreds at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Jerusalem on Saturday, Interfax reported. <!-- @page { margin: 0.79in } P { margin-bottom: 0.08in } ->

Kirill also met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whom he praised for supporting Christian holy sites, including the Church of the Nativity in <!-- @page { margin: 0.79in } P { margin-bottom: 0.08in } Bethlehem.

Dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church should be a part of the peace process, Abbas said. He awarded Kirill the "Star of Bethlehem," the Palestinian territories' top honor.

On Sunday, Kirill prayed with the pilgrims, mostly from Russia and the former Soviet Union, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of Orthodox Christianity's holiest sites.

After a meeting with President Vladimir Putin in June, Abbas said the West Bank town of Bethlehem would rename a street in honor of the Russian leader, Radio Liberty reported at the time.

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