Nine years have already passed since the first anti-government protests of Syria’s civil uprising, the so-called “Arab Spring”, organized from overseas by those pulling the strings in the Middle East and North Africa and broken up by the police. This civil uprising phase is said to have marked the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. According to the Spanish online newspaper Público, the West played a crucial role by intervening in the initial stage of the conflict in the Siege of Daraa, which would lead to the escalation of the Syrian conflict into a full-blown civil war. The newspaper goes on to describe how the United States and their allies armed and bankrolled a tiny minority they called “moderate rebels”, and gave the green light to countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to do the same.

Over the years, the civilian population in Syria have suffered terrible losses, and their country’s infrastructure and economy have been left in ruins. The situation has also been made worse by terrorist activities carried out by DAESH and affiliated militants, as well as openly subversive and aggressive policy of the US, a country which is still trying to use militants and various extremist groups to shamelessly plunder Syria’s national assets and energy resources to this day.

The obsession Ankara later developed with protecting its borders with Syria and preventing the Syrian Kurds from establishing their own state on the border with Turkey did nothing to help stabilize the situation in Syria. The United States, Britain and France actually began to direct their trilateral aggression against Syria under the flimsy pretext of protecting the Syrian people from President Bashar al-Assad’s “apparent chemical weapons attack on civilians.” Saudi Arabia joined them, along with a few other Arab countries that intervened in the Syrian conflict under the pretext of protecting the “Sunni” presence in the face of Iranian “Shiite” expansion, and in order to combat the
Iranian influence on Syrian territory.

The measures taken by the international community in conjunction with the Syrian authorities to stabilize the situation in the country and bring an end to the bloodshed did not produce any significant results for a long time. Their only significant achievement was probably the decisive victory over DAESH terrorists in Syria and in the Middle East as a whole, which the Russian Aerospace Forces played a major role in. Now only small scattered groups of DAESH militants are left in Syria, the most notable of them being in Idlib and its immediate surroundings, who the Syrian Armed Forces continue to fight alongside Russian and Turkish soldiers.

A significant recent development in the Syrian peace process was the ceasefire deal signed on March 5 by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who agreed to turn Idlib into a de-escalation zone. The reason why Russia and Turkey decided to intervene at the highest level in the Syrian peace process was due to a sharp escalation in the situation in Idlib, where a large-scale offensive had been launched by the Syrian Army against the armed opposition and terrorists in January. After government forces managed to retake almost half of the Idlib de-escalation zone, leaving a number of Turkish observation posts in their wake, Ankara dramatically increased its military presence in the region and launched operation Spring Shield. In February, at least 62 Turkish soldiers were killed, almost 100 soldiers were left wounded, several dozen Turkish armored vehicles were destroyed, and more than a dozen drones were shot down, including armed drones.

The meeting between the Turkish and Russian presidents has shown that the Turkish leader is able to cooperate constructively, and that a peaceful settlement may only be reached in Syria if the interests of all parties are taken into account, who need to focus on ending the conflict as soon as possible. No one wants any more lives to be lost. In order to prevent more casualties in the Turkish Armed Forces, Russia has expressed a desire to work together with Turkey. Russia’s firm stance on Idlib does not mean that Moscow is unwilling to consider Ankara’s interests “on the ground”. At the same time, Moscow makes it perfectly clear to international players that constructive cooperation with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in international and bilateral formats is a prerequisite and the only way to resolve the Syrian conflict.

Most of Syria has now been recaptured by the Syrian government. The terrorists have only been left with a small part of Idlib province in the North of the country where they are still holding on. The US continues to occupy a zone around Al-Tanf in southern Syria where the Rukban refugee camp is located and living conditions are dire. Turkish and Russian forces are carrying out joint military patrols along one of the most important sections of the M4 motorway in Syria, which links the cities of Aleppo and Latakia. Thanks to the agreement between Ankara and Moscow, this zone is now safe. Up until recently, the highway was controlled by militants.

The Russian and Syrian governments are still working to find a non-military solution to the war in Syria and to provide comprehensive assistance to help the Syrian people restore peaceful life. Since the Syrian peace process began, the Russian military has conducted 2416 humanitarian aid operations in Syria, delivering 4,016.54 tons worth of material humanitarian aid to Syrians over this period, and Russian military medics have provided medical assistance to 132,598 Syrians.

The Syrian Army’s military engineers have performed mine clearance operations in the settlements of Douma (Damascus province), Jasim and al-Harra (Daraa province).

As a result of all these operations, Syrian refugees have begun returning to areas that had still been occupied by militants up until recently. On 24 March alone, 61 refugees returned to the Syrian Arab Republic from neighboring countries. Life has also resumed in the suburbs of Palmyra since the city was liberated, although much work still needs to be done to restore the local infrastructure. Refugees from the Rukban refugee camp have also begun returning to Palmyra, after they had been made to pay for tents, food and medicine in the camp controlled by US forces and southern Syrian militants, and some say they were even coerced into joining the ranks of an anti-government militia.

As part of the ongoing peace process in Syria, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has issued a decree granting a general amnesty on the territory of the country in order to encourage terrorist groups to lay down their weapons and offering terrorists a chance to have their actions pardoned. They either choose to lay down their weapons and live peacefully, or their actions will be deemed a rejection of the Syrian peaceful process.

The agreements reached when the presidents of Russia and Turkey met in person on March 5 and the measures that have since been taken based on these agreements offer us some hope that an early solution may be found to finally bring peace to Syria. This will of course not only depend greatly on the official government of the Syrian Arab
Republic, but also on external actors and their willingness both to provide constructive humanitarian support for Bashar al-Assad’s government during this difficult chapter in the country’s history, and to band together with the entire international community to help rebuild Syria.

*Vladimir Platov, Middle East expert, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*