On 11 December, on his way to Egypt, the Russian president stopped off at the Armed Forces’ base in Khmeimim, where he congratulated Russian soldiers on the defeat of DAESH and announced the beginning of Russian troops’ withdrawal from Syria. In fact, in the meeting with President Vladimir Putin in the Khmeinim air base, representatives of the Russian Aerospace Forces stated that the withdrawal of their aircraft from Syria would start on 11 December.

Does this mean that the civil war in Syria, which has been encouraged and paid for by the U.S.A., Saudi Arabia and Qatar since 2011, has finished? No, it doesn’t. But it is possible to say that thanks to the actions of Russia’s Aerospace Forces, military advisers, and Special Operations Forces, DAESH is no longer a powerful terrorist organization with its own territory and administration. This is confirmed by reports from all the world’s media organizations that on December 9 DAESH literally evaporated in one day. It is true that its militants have not gone anywhere. They have just gone underground, split up into small groups and hidden, forming sleeper cells in cities and other population centres. By the end of the war with DAESH these ‘warriors of Islam’ had fallen in number from 300,000 to 25,000.

However, 25,000 people cannot just disappear in one day. Earlier, starting this summer, some of them had returned home to their countries- including both European countries and Russia. A significant number have moved to Libya,
Algeria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Nigeria and a range of other countries. But the majority just appear to have disappeared into thin air. This means that we need to be prepared to adopt new methods to fight this terrorist group, including outside Syria and Iraq. And not just in Arabic, African and Asian countries, but also in the E.U. and U.S.A. And in Russia, as well. DAESH is moving from fighting on the battlefield with conventional troops to terrorism and guerrilla-style warfare – and Russian regular forces, military advisers and Aerospace Forces are not needed in this situation. Instead, dealing with terrorists is a job for national security services, intelligence services, police and special operations forces. Not for the army.

Vladimir Putin’s declaration of the withdrawal of troops from Syria clearly does not mean that they will all leave. They will be reduced in number, leaving only those that are absolutely essential. And it is likely that an ‘essential’ military presence will be interpreted as ‘enough people to be able to defend themselves’

Something else should be pointed out: DAESH, as it was in autumn 2015 when Russian Aerospace Forces and troops arrived in Syria, has been destroyed. But the question remains: does this mean the end of the civil war in Syria? For it wasn’t DAESH who unleashed the war, but the Syrian opposition, armed and financed by the West, together with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and trained in Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. And its forces have certainly not been destroyed. They are enjoying the safety of the de-escalation zones set up under the Astana agreement. And their political leaders are calling for Assad’s departure while living in various E.U. countries, and in Qatar and Turkey. And then there are other terrorist organizations that are not part of DAESH: Tahrir al-Sham, factions of the Al-Nusra Front and many other smaller extremist groups: their forces have not been defeated. They are active in Damascus Governorate, from where they periodically fire mortars at the Russian embassy in the Syrian capital, as well as in Hama, Idlib, Lakatia, Aleppo and in the south and south-west of Syria.

The whole of the east of Syria is under the control of Kurds from the Syrian Democratic Forces (supported by U.S.), who control 2/3 of the country’s oil and gas fields and have no wish to go back to being controlled by the country’s central government. There are also Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard divisions and Hezbollah units in Syria, whose positions are continually under Israeli Air Force fire. Recently up to a thousand DAESH militants entered Idlib and fought with Tahrir-al-Sham forces. So they are already present in the north of the country.
So, even if it is true that DAESH no longer exists, the war in Syria is continuing, and on many fronts. And the political process of internal regulation has not been successful in getting the Syrian opposition and Turkey to sit down at the same table as the Kurds and negotiate with them. It is true that this situation is in the U.S.A.’s interests as it allows it to argue that its military presence in Syria is essential, even though, unlike the Russian and Iranian presence, it is illegal. Only the Turks and Iranians are unhappy with the situation. Ankara cannot accept the creation of a Kurdish entity in Syrian territory, and Teheran would find it difficult to fight on the ground without the support of the Russian Aerospace Forces, especially close to Syria’s border with Israel.

It is therefore clear that the Kurdish question is one of the main issues on the agenda in Vladimir Putin’s talks with Recep Erdoğan.

There is one more very important issue, from a strategic and regional point of view: the destruction of DAESH’s hierarchy has led to colossal risks which are likely to materialize in the future- just as the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq had catastrophic results throughout the region. The de facto occupation of Iraq, led by the U.S.A. opened the door to a series of “color revolutions” throughout the Arab world and not only brought the Sunni-Shi’ite conflict to the surface, but allowed it to blaze with a new level of intensity. But the former U.S. President, George Bush, is indifferent to this- after all he is not president any more. Others are trying to sort out the mess he left. Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, for example, not to mention the leaders of other countries in the region, such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan and Lebanon.

So, it is premature to talk of an end to the war in Syria. It is continuing, but now with different front lines and in a new form. In the same way, DAESH has not disappeared, but has just entered a new, underground, phase in its activities. And it is impossible to exclude the possibility that in the future DAESH will emerge as a quasi-state in some other conflict zone, for example in Libya. Or in Egypt, where Abdel-Fatteh el-Sisi’s is still fighting the Moslem Brotherhood, which is growing in strength, and terrorist groups in the Sinai and Persian Gulf regions.

And there remains the most important question for the region: the face-off between the U.S.-Saudi-Israeli coalition
and the Shi’ite coalition headed by Iran. The proposal to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and the situation in Yemen have just delayed things, but have not affected the three-party coalition’s determination to deal a blow to Iran’s positions in the region. This does not mean that the question is closed- it is most likely to be raised again in 2018 after the Christmas holidays in the U.S, and closer to the Russian presidential elections. As long as the current regime in Saudi Arabia does not collapse as a result of the current wave of repression led by the Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman. And the Houthis may be able to stabilize the situation in Yemen after the killing of Ali Abdulleh Saleh. The main wave of conflict in the Middle East is still ahead of us.

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