

Op-ed: Over 1.5 million refugees return home, according to Russian UN Envoy – Fake news or hidden news?

By Willy Fautré

HRWF (25.08.2018) - European media repeatedly point at the decrease of refugees from Syria as if it were the work of the EU and the heads of EU member states but is it? Russia and Turkey also claim in their media that this decline is the result of their policies.

On 23 August, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya announced that "more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have returned to their homes as 96% of Syria's territory has been liberated from terrorists thanks to the efforts of the Syrian army backed by the Russian taskforce."

"More than 1,400 populated localities in Syria have been liberated from terrorists and more than 96% of its territory has come under control of government troops and militias thanks to the support from the Russian armed forces," he said at a United Nations Security Council meeting on threats to international peace and stability coming from terrorism.

"As a result, more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees have been able to return to their homeland," he stressed.

Last week, Russian President's Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin visited Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey to discuss the problem of Syrian refugees. After the visit, Lavrentyev told TASS that the Russian side had invited Turkey to organize regular work to promote the process of the return of Syrian refugees to the places of their permanent residence. It was announced that Moscow and Ankara are interested in cooperating in creating conditions for the safe return of Syrian nationals to their home country.

Fake news?

Of course, it would be politically uncomfortable to credit Moscow and Ankara with the sharp decline in the EU of the number of migrants from Syria and to recognize the pragmatic results of Putin's policy in the Astana process in which the West had no say.

If it is not true, Juncker and Western heads of state should denounce such a fake news but they still do not. The ball is now in the court of Brussels.

Towards a new constitution in Syria backed by Moscow

About the discussions between Moscow and Ankara, Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, was quoted as saying by TASS: "We focused on the situation in Syria, including the implementation of agreements reached at the Astana-format summits, high-level and expert meetings, as well as the execution of decisions made at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, which relate to the formation of a constitutional committee."

Participants in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi on January 30, decided to establish a constitutional committee that will work on the country's new constitution. The full candidate list will comprise 150 people, including 100 representatives of the Syrian government and domestic opposition, as well as 50 members of the foreign-based opposition. The UN envoy suggested that the committee should consist of no more than 50 members.

Humanitarian aid from Russia

A public-opinion poll conducted in Russia in late 2017 revealed that 73 percent of the country's citizens consider it necessary to continue helping Syria after the end of the current conflict. An even larger proportion of respondents – 75 percent – said that they would like to see Russia continue sending humanitarian aid to Syria.

A few days ago, Central Muslim Spiritual Board chairman and Russian Chief Mufti Talgat Tajuddin called on the international community to provide humanitarian aid to Syria.

"We are calling on all peoples and countries of the world, primarily Arab and Muslim countries, to extend humanitarian aid to the people of Syria who have suffered from the atrocities of international terrorism and also refugees who are returning to their home country," he said during a sermon on the occasion of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim holiday, also known as the "Festival of Sacrifice", at the Lala Tulpan (Tulip in Bloom) mosque in Ufa on 21 August.

The Muslim community takes pride in the fact that "our country has been providing genuine assistance to the fraternal people of Syria in order to repel the aggression of terrorism and restore peaceful life on this land," he said.

The Russian chief mufti also criticized those who apply double standards and "try to take advantage of any occasion to pit peoples and states against each other, those who, while welcoming the fight against terrorism, are using it only in their own interests." (Interfax-religion.com, 21 August 2018)

Putin the Savior of Christians in Syria?

Putin wants to appear as the Savior of Christians in Syria while the EU and most EU member states are reluctant to side with the local historical Christian minorities. In an article entitled "Moscow Patriarchate promotes the Kremlin's interests and its own in the Middle East", published in Eurasia Daily Monitor on 12 December 2017 (<http://bit.ly/2nUW74J>), Paul Goble writes:

"The Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate is intensifying its efforts to promote the Kremlin's interests and its own in the Middle East. Although the Church, either directly or as a cover for Soviet and Russian security agencies, has long been active in that region—the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society is the only Russian post there that lasted from Imperial times through Soviet ones to the present (<http://bit.ly/2CbKHYM> Mospat.ru, October 11; <http://bit.ly/2CemnKD> Portal-credo.ru, December 9) the Moscow Patriarchate is now expanding its efforts. These activities help Vladimir Putin in his drive to expand Russian influence in the Middle East, given the waning of US power there (see <http://bit.ly/2nX4Q6h> Jamestown.org, October 5). At the same time, they ensure that Orthodox Churches in the region will continue to back the Moscow Patriarchate against the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople on issues like autocephaly for Ukraine and the Moscow Patriarchate's claim of "canonical territory" over the entire former Soviet space.

The Kremlin is currently convinced it can fill the niche that Washington had in the Middle East for three reasons: First, as Putin's recent visit to the region shows (<http://bit.ly/2AkuIuz> Kremlin.ru, December 11), the perception of victory of Russian forces over the Islamic State in Syria as well as Moscow's successful backing of President Bashar al-Assad are popular. Second, the Russian president has presented himself as the chief defender of Christians in the region, something popular even among Donald Trump's base in the United States; it is, thus, yet another means of projecting influence at Washington's expense. And third, the Kremlin has positioned itself against Trump's declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, a widely unpopular view in the region (<http://bit.ly/2j0FSOK> Yerkramas.org, December 12).

In support of those policies, Moscow Patriarch Kirill organized a meeting last week (December 4) between Putin and eleven patriarchs and two heads of delegations of Orthodox Churches who were in the Russian capital for a major conclave of the Russian Orthodox Church. Most of the churchmen attending were the leaders of the historical Orthodox patriarchates in the Middle East, and all appeared more than willing to lend their support to the idea that cooperation at the Church-to-Church level would boost the policies Putin and Kirill now back (<http://bit.ly/2BhEUbg> Russkaya Liniya, December 5).

A major reason behind their agreement on this point is that the Russian president promised to offer his support to all the Orthodox Churches in the entire world, including, as the Russkaya Liniya religious affairs portal noted, "in the Middle East in particular." That was music to the ears of many if not all in attendance, who are under pressure not only from the predominantly Muslim populations in which they function but also from the Universal Patriarchate in Constantinople. The latter has pretensions, as the senior Orthodox body, to becoming a kind of eastern papacy that can give orders to the others, including making decisions-as it has already-on the autocephaly of groups within their canonical areas that want independence from the existing patriarchates (<http://bit.ly/2CbJ8yD> Russkaya Liniya, December 5)."

Conclusion

The West's policy to first oust Bashar al-Assad before rebuilding Syria politically has led to an unending war in the country, massive migration waves to Europe, an increase in terrorist attempts in EU countries, the rise in power of extreme-right parties and the dangerous banalization of anti-Muslim attitudes.

Putin has become the kingmaker in the region and wants to appear as the protector of Muslims against radical Islamism and the savior of Christian minorities.

Is it what the EU wanted?