



Fallout from the Syrian Victory

OE Watch Commentary: A major factor in the Kremlin's calculus to become militarily involved in Syria centered upon the assertion that it made more sense to destroy terrorists on Syrian soil rather than waiting for them to strike in Russia. At the time, Kremlin officials claimed that thousands of Russians had traveled to Syria to join the terrorist cause. Now that the fight against ISIS appears to be nearly completed, questions have arisen regarding how to handle those ethnic Russians who fought or lived under the ISIS banner. The accompanying excerpt from the moderate news source, *Kommersant*, describes some of the challenges in repatriating from Syria and Iraq those ethnic Russian women and children associated with ISIS.

The article begins by referring to the huge scale of the problem, claiming "that in Idlib alone there are 7,000 Russian widows. Among them, there are 3,000-3,500 women from the North Caucasus. And each of them has up to four or five children." The article quotes "the head of Chechnya's Human Rights Council," that these women were "brought to territory controlled by the ISIL...by their husbands." Up until this past year, the leadership in Chechnya had been at the forefront in trying to repatriate these women and children, and in 2017, managed to bring back to Russia "more than 90 women and children." However, the procedure regarding repatriation of these women and children has changed, with federal officials now in control, and according to the source quoted in the article, "this year [2018], the Russian authorities have not yet picked up a single woman."

The article describes the painful route of one Russian woman who traveled to Syria with her children in 2014 to join her husband who fought for ISIS. After his death, she returned to Russia in 2017, where she "was detained and sentenced to eight years." She questioned this verdict, claiming that "membership of an illegal armed formation amounted to me cooking and washing for my husband." Her sentence has been "deferred for 13 years until her youngest child reaches the age of 14."

The Kremlin may indeed have helped the government forces of Assad to defeat terrorists within Syria, but the fallout for Russia from this victory has yet to be fully reckoned. **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

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Source: Anastasiya Kurilova, Valeriya Mishina, "В Россию просят семь тысяч вдов (Seven Thousand Widows Are Asking to Return to Russia)," *Kommersant*, 14 November 2018. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3798924>

There are several thousand Russian women in Syria, brought to territory controlled by the ISIL [the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Levant] organization, which is banned in Russia, by their husbands. Kheda Saratova, a member of the head of Chechnya's Human Rights Council, stated this. She stressed that not a single woman had managed to return home since the start of the year.... "A guide who took Russian women to a safe place told me that in Idlib alone there are 7,000 Russian widows. Among them, there are 3,000-3,500 women from the North Caucasus. And each of them has up to four or five children," Mrs Saratova told journalists the day before.... According to Mrs Saratova, 700 relatives of women who are in Syria have appealed to her. They are residents of the North Caucasus, Penzenskaya and Voronezhskaya Oblasts, Tatarstan, Buryatiya, Bashkiriya, Permskiy Kray, and other regions.

You may recall that at the beginning of 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin reported that "up to 4,000 people from Russia and about five thousand from the republics of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States]" were fighting on the side of the militants in Syria. In September 2018, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that over the three years of the operation in Syria, 87,000 militants, including 4,500 from Russia and the CIS countries, had been annihilated.... People started to talk about the need for Russian women and their children to come home from Syria in the summer of 2017. At that time the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, spoke about how the mother of four-year-old Bilal Tagirov, who was taken to Syria by his father, had appealed to him... As a result, more than 90 women and children were brought back to Russia before the end of 2017...

"Young people need to be warned so that they do not fall into this trap. We were there and saw everything," Mrs Abakarova told Kommersant. Her husband took her with their two children to Turkey, and then to Syria at the end of 2014. In the spring of 2017, he died and the woman, who already had four children on her hands, started to seek an opportunity to leave. Only in October 2017 did she reach Kurdish territory with her children, from where she was taken by Mr Sabsabi. In Russia, Mrs Abakarova was detained and sentenced to eight years under article 208 of the Russian Federation Criminal Code, deferred for 13 years until her youngest child reaches the age of 14. "Membership of an illegal armed formation amounted to me cooking and washing for my husband," she says....