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Russia's Caspian Flotilla shows who is the boss in the Middle East

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The Russian Air Force continues striking the militant-controlled territory of Syria. Yet, the US is still unwilling to join forces with Russia in the fight against the Islamic State. What forces are clashing now in Syria? Pravda.Ru conducted an interview on the subject with senior officer at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Alexander Demchenko.

"What do you think of the cruise missile attacks of the Russian Caspian Flotilla on the ISIS-controlled territory of Syria?"

"Firstly, the cruise missile attack indicated that the anti-terrorist operation in Syria is developing and taking a larger scale. Secondly, **the attack demonstrated Russia's ability to strike a remote country in the Middle East from the Russian territory, from the territory of the Caspian Sea.**

"Yet, it is too early to say that the operation against militants has taken a turn towards victory over them. There is still no ground offensive that would be carried out by the forces of Bashar Assad and his allies, the Syrian militias."

Video: Russian Caspian Flotilla attacks ISIS in Syria

"The missiles flew bypassing the mainland, bypassing Turkey, the Caucasus, and passed through the airspace of Iran and Iraq that gave the missiles an air corridor. Has it all been coordinated in advance?"

"I think so, because, we have not heard any complains either from Iraq or from Iran. These two countries share a clear position on the Syrian conflict: the Islamic State for them is one common enemy. For Iran, the Islamic State is a religious enemy, because this terrorist organization advocates a war between Sunnis and Shiites."

"How important is this religious aspect in the conflict?"

"One of the causes of the conflict in Syria is the fact that the Shiite Alawite minority had been staying in power for long to the detriment of the Sunnis. The latter created an armed opposition camp. The division into Sunni and Shiite states lies on the surface. **In fact, this is a struggle for regional leadership between the powerful Iran and the Gulf States. This is not a religious conflict at all.**"

"Can we say that an anti-terrorist coalition in the Middle East has been established in the face of Russia, Iraq, Iran, Syria?"

"I think we can. Members of this organization share mutual understanding, unlike Russia's Western partners that remain critical of Russia's actions, even though they too realize that Russia is attacking the terrorists that pose a threat to the West as well."

Russia's swift actions in Syria put the West into a stupor

"Do you think there are moderate Islamists or moderate opposition there?"

"There is moderate opposition in Syria, of course. This opposition also includes the so-called internal Syrian opposition that used to cooperate with al-Assad and be part of the government, as well as the external opposition - the secular Syrian opposition that takes part in various international forums and so on.

"If we speak about battlefield, members of armed opposition groups very often join radical groups, such as Jabhat an Nusra that is associated with Al-Qaeda. There is moderate Syrian

opposition, there were several meetings conducted with representatives of this opposition in Moscow, although no progress has been achieved in the talks so far. However, the dialogue continues, although it is very hard to convince them to negotiate with Assad."

"Those who struggle against the legitimate government - can they be referred to as opposition? Usually, such people are called terrorists rather than opposition."

"There is a civil war in Syria. This is not the type of the opposition that holds rallies on city squares. Syrian opposition activists have weapons in their hands. Generally, there are five types of forces in Syria: Bashar al-Assad, his government forces, militia units, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Shiites that support Bashar Assad."

"There is opposition, including secular opposition that does not stand up against the West. There is also a radical Islamist organization - the opposition, represented by the Islamic State, Jabhat an Nusra that fight against all."

"The Free Syrian Army - are they a form of opposition or are they Islamists?"

"There are Islamists in their ranks. This is not a centralized military structure. There are people in the Free Syrian Army, with whom it is possible to negotiate."

"According to the USA, Russia is bombing the moderate opposition of Syria."

"The Americans try to present the Russian operation in Syria as military interference on Assad's side to restore control over Syria. Russia does want to help Assad in his years of struggle. He has been fighting for five years after all."

"Why isn't the US willing to cooperate with Russia in the fight against the Islamic State?"

US in Syria: A donkey with two bags of gold will win any war

"Because this is the first phase of what is happening. After the Islamic State starts losing, a question will arise on how to develop ties between Assad and the secular Syrian opposition. Russia and the United States share different views on Assad. From time to time, the United States says that Assad must go, because he has no future in the future political system of Syria. At the same time, one can draw attention to the fact that the Americans have not been saying that too often lately."

"Do you think there can be an attempt made to stop Russia?"

"Not militarily. Verbal warfare is already on, predictably. A European official has recently said that, though, the EU was not going to impose more sanctions on Russia because of the current operation in Syria. The operation in Syria can in no way be compared with the crisis in Ukraine, on which Russia and the European Union are very much opposed to each other."

"What is the problem with Turkey? Turkish President Erdogan threatened to terminate a gas contract with Russia."

"Turkey is Syria's neighbor. Turkey is concerned the Kurdish enclave may become a permanent form on the territory of Syria. Erdogan has domestic political considerations. The popularity of his party has declined in recent years, so he works for his rating in Turkey as well."

"What do you think Russia's strategic goals in the Middle East are? Is there a joint plan with Iran or Iraq?"

"Of course, when one sends one's troops abroad, one tries not to lose face in battle. Today, Russia's image in the world has improved a lot. Some may not like it, but still, everyone sees that Russia is taking a strong and decisive step."