Iraq Conference in Paris: Pros and Cons for Russia

An international conference on the security of Iraq was convened on September 15 in Paris and included foreign ministers and senior representatives from 40 countries, primarily NATO members, other western US allies, Arab countries, Russia and China. The meeting aimed to work out a unified stance to destroy the Islamic threat stemming from the Islamic State terrorist group, which is estimated to include around 70,000 to 80,000 armed militants, primarily from Iraq, Syria, other Muslim countries, over two thousand European Union citizens and several hundred people originating from the Muslim regions of the Northern Caucasus, principally from Chechnya and Dagestan.

Another noteworthy fact is that the conference was held immediately after US State Secretary John Kerry’s trip to the Middle East focusing on a meeting in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia) attended by various heads of foreign ministries from the US, six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, Turkey and Jordan, which did not end up achieving the results Washington had hoped for. Just recently, French President François Hollande also travelled to Baghdad, expressing his readiness to join the NATO-Arab coalition against IS that is being put together by the US, seemingly as a last-ditch effort to raise his swiftly falling ratings inside the country. Meanwhile, England and Australia have already amassed their air forces to bomb IS positions.

It was reported that upon the conclusion of the Paris conference, its participants agreed to provide various kinds of support for the Iraqi government, which includes military support, to aid their fight against the Islamic State movement. This was specified in the statement signed at the end of the conference, which particularly notes, “The conference participants asserted that Daech (ISIL) is a threat not only to Iraq but also to the entire international community... To that end, they committed to supporting the new Iraqi Government in its fight against Daech (ISIL), by any means necessary, including appropriate military assistance...” The statement did not clarify what kind of military assistance this entails in particular.

However, it is hard to imagine how so many foreign ministers could possibly agree to something specific in the span of a few hours as they all have their various methods of how to resolve the IS issue, especially while the main neighbours to Iraq - Syria and Iran - were not present. It was no accident that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov remarked at the conference that the ambitions to attack Islamic State positions in Syria without cooperation from Damascus are alarming. “I will emphasize this once more: we see the terrorist threat as being too great for a reaction against it to be based on a specific ideological foundation or a violation of international law,” added the Russian minister. He also noted that Syria and Iran must participate in the fight against the Islamic State equally with other nations. “Syria and Iran are natural allies in the fight against IS and their participation in our meeting today could have significantly enriched our work. The moral standards that are at the foundation of the fight against terrorism cannot be blurred.”

This fairly odd approach to fighting terrorism was initiated by the US. It was last week on September 10 that US President Barack Obama announced the American strategy for fighting the IS radicals. It entails carrying out air strikes against Islamic positions not only in Iraq, but in Syria as well. The conference host country France almost immediately confirmed that it is ready to join in the air strikes. The first surveillance flights over Iraq were conducted by French planes on September 14. When opening the ceremony, President François Hollande also
Meanwhile, the republicans are urging Obama to approve a ground operation against the Islamic State. In his answer during the September 10 broadcast, the head of the White House stated that as part of the country’s strategy for fighting the IS terrorist group, “we will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq”. Obama also promised that the strategy of fighting IS “will not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil”. However, Obama stated that he “will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq”.

What legal justifications does the US have to begin bombing a sovereign nation, Syria, the American leader did not say. He only stated that “we cannot rely on an Assad regime” and that the Syrian government “will never regain the legitimacy it has lost”.

The US also intends to discuss the problem of preventing foreign militants from penetrating into internal armed conflicts with senior officials at the upcoming session of the UN General Assembly in New York. The White House has commented that this session of the UN Security Council is planned for September 24.

For now, the US wants to destroy IS through a “comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy” that will rest on four main points. Firstly, Washington intends to “conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists. Second, we will increase our support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground. Third, we will continue to draw on our substantial counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL attacks. Fourth, we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by this terrorist organization.” Overall, nothing new to add to what has already been said in the last few months. It’s also unclear as to who the US wants to include into its “broad” anti-terrorist coalition. Evidently it will not be Russia, Syria or Iran, without whom it would be exceedingly difficult to overcome terrorism in this region.

The US president has also announced that it is not necessary to obtain separate approval from the US Congress to use American armed forces to implement earlier approved plans for opposing IS. Obama stated that he has “the authority to address the threat from ISIL”. This authority will be used in Iraq firstly to expand the missile strikes against IS to support the advance of the local security forces. Additionally, 475 American military advisors will be sent to Iraq to provide consultations to the local forces but they “will not have a combat mission”. However, Obama is already seeking Congress approval to allocate $500 million to arm and train the so-called “moderate” Syrian oppositional forces, meaning the Free Syrian Army.

Despite Russia’s strained relations with US and Europe, the country’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was still invited to the international Iraq conference. It would appear that Washington understands that without Russian support, it will be very hard to achieve the goals outlined in Obama’s plan. After all, without Syria and Iran, it will be especially difficult to resolve the issue with IS. But Russia is a kind of “key” to Iran and Syria, and to all of the other players who will be vital in tackling the IS issue. A third of Syria’s territory is already controlled by the Islamic State. This is why the US wants to silently secure Russian support. Obama’s main goal is to demonstrate a kind of coherence and consistency in the current American policy. There really isn't another way for him to prove consistency in his foreign policy. That’s when the republicans will get the chance to win the battle inside the US even before the midterm elections to the Senate and the Congress, and the presidency is sure to follow.

In Jeddah, State Secretary John Kerry made it clear that Obama does not intend to invite Russia into the developing coalition against the Islamic State. However, the Americans evidently intend to use Russia to achieve some interim goals. Especially since the destruction of the IS is beneficial for Moscow as the group threatens to destabilise the situation in the Northern Caucasus as well. We must admit that the existence of this group is a unique situation where a terrorist organisation not only exists as a powerful force with well-armed armies, but also establishes itself as a state with its own territorial system. It’s highly unlikely that Moscow will be able to defeat it by itself, even with its allies in this region.

It is in Russia’s best interests to ensure that IS would be absolutely destroyed or greatly weakened, even if the US plays a significant part in the process. Because the longer the group exists, the more it will prolong the conflict in Iraq and Syria, which will make the situation that much worse for Russian stability on its southern borders. The number of Russian citizens heading to the Middle East to fight is ever increasing. The faster all of this ends, the less “fighters” trained in a specific ideological and military style will be returning to Russia, to the Northern Caucasus and along the Volga, to then fight against the Russian authorities. For now, there is no leap forward in Moscow’s foreign policy regarding IS as everything is concentrated on Ukraine. Meanwhile, the US is attempting to provide some kind of plan, even if it is flawed. This is why, in the present circumstances, Russia should not oppose this, but instead find some kind of benefit for herself.
Viktor Titov, Ph.D in Historical Sciences and political commentator on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine New Eastern Outlook