The anti-terrorism coalition assembled by the United States with help from its Persian Gulf and western European allies is gaining momentum. More than 40 countries have already signed up, and most of them are willing to provide humanitarian aid. However, there is a firm "core group" of countries that have expressed their desire to make "a military contribution." It consists of 10 NATO countries and 10 of Washington's closest partners in the region. Since 8 August, the Americans have launched almost 200 airstrikes against Islamic State group positions, and joining the U.S. military action thus far are France, Great Britain, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands. Among the regional allies of Washington, the air forces of Saudi Arabia and the UAE have taken part in the raids, some of which were in Syria. All of this has been done without the express consent of Syria's rulers and without the blessing of the UN Security Council.

The Islamic State group obviously has no intention of surrendering. It has demonstrated its tenacity and aggressiveness, drawing between 10,000 and 30,000 fighters into its ranks, according to various estimates. And of those, at least 2,000 came from Europe. IS possesses its own financial resources, and it has obtained even more since the summer. It has seized banks in Mosul, oil fields with a capacity of up to 60,000 barrels per day (although some of the ones in Syria were recently hit by U.S. airstrikes), and state-of-the-art weaponry that it captured from the Iraqi army. During the second half of September, the militants occupied 60 more communities in Syria, adding to the already IS-controlled one-third of Iraq. Peaceful civilians, mostly Syrian Kurds, were forced to flee en masse to Turkey, just like their Yazidi relatives before them.

All of this raises serious questions about the viability of Washington's "international coalition." As of now, it looks like a collection of assorted countries with different interests. The appearance is that these countries are being tied to one another by the content-deficient slogan of a shared fight against terrorism, which, in isolation from any specifics, is no better than the trite "struggle for democracy" label that has been fully discredited in the wake of the Arab Spring.

That selfsame slogan about a fight against terrorism was rushed to the forefront by the United States, lending it a superficial and impromptu quality. To any impartial observer, the question that occurs immediately is: Why is Washington only now sounding that alarm? Could it be that prior to the Islamic State there was no reason not to create a coalition against terrorism? Wasn't it abundantly clear to everyone that over the course of three years, against a backdrop of civil war and thinly disguised outside interference in a domestic conflict, the untamed animal of radical political Islam was growing in Syria? The Russian diplomatic corps spoke vociferously about that very thing. Did the United States and its regional allies, especially the Sunni monarchies of the Persian Gulf, really and truly have nothing at all to do with this? When the unshaven ruffians of the Nusra Front (an al-Qaida offshoot) were playing football in the streets of Syrian cities with the heads of Syrian soldiers, eating their livers, ripping open the bellies of pregnant women, wasn't that terrorism, unbelievable brutality and the manifestation of pure evil? Why were such obvious dehumanization and cannibalism spared from the same epithets now being heaped on IS?

Another oddity is that the same countries that fueled the conflict in Syria and regularly supplied weapons to the militants (for example, Qatar and Turkey) suddenly became dedicated terrorism fighters in the face of the IS, and the
thugs from the Syrian opposition (see the Islamic Front) were transformed into "assistants" in the struggle against the "caliphate" and also into "moderates" the United States somehow planned to create in Saudi Arabia. Evidently the plan was to somehow, perhaps by using genetic manipulations, draw out the "pro-democracy" rebels among them.

It's no accident that on the Arab streets and in the lofty political salons of many Middle Eastern countries, doubts are starting to creep in about the real underpinnings of the "anti-terrorist operation." Even that bulwark of American interventionism The New York Times was compelled in its 22 September issue to write: "Suspicious run deep in Iraq that the CIA and the Islamic State are united." Prominent people in Baghdad are making statements on that subject, such as Deputy Prime Minister Bakha al-Aradzhi. Needless to say that simple citizens do too.

Besides these people's staunch certitude that the CIA played a significant role in the creation of IS, some suspicious facts lend credence to this side of the story. For example, British newspaper The Daily Mail cited Butaynu Shabaan, an official spokesman for Syrian President Bashar Assad, in reporting on 26 August that the American journalist James Foley was executed a year ago, not in 2014, although the video depicting his death was published only recently. Recall that the deaths of Foley and fellow American Steven Sotloff were used as a pretext for the American campaign against the Islamic State group.

The origins of the Islamic State group and the Americans' swift efforts to organize a coalition against it are not the only shady actions. IS has been active in Syria and Iraq since 2011 and was already known in 2006. American motives cast further suspicion on the coalition. If the discussion of goals and methods of the coalition started with the mention of the necessity of using air power to destroy IS, other suggestions quickly started to be heard.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey has said that to defeat the Islamic State militants, Washington would still need to wage a more intrusive campaign. Speaking to Congress on 16 September, he said he would recommend that the president authorize a ground operation if the situation requires. Dempsey didn't specify what circumstances might prompt that, but he added that there is little doubt such a move will be required sooner or later. He repeated that statement a second time on 26 September.

However, the parameters of that operation remain a mystery. So what is the conversation about? Are we talking about destroying the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq, which appears to be the obvious thing? But is it really? Not long ago, the United States withdrew the command of its own troops and wagered on the Kurds and Iraqi army. The USA promised to send only 475 additional troops to Iraq. Thus the American contingent should have totaled 1,500 soldiers. Their purpose is to support and train the Iraqi troops and Kurdish forces, not engage in combat, the papers say. According to a report in the French newspaper Le Monde on 12 September, the experts believe that the success of the operation will depend on whether the United States can find supporters among the Sunni forces in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the United States considers it crucial to halt the pro-Shiite actions of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in order to return control over the Sunni areas. Under pressure from Washington, the new government of Haidar al-Abadi committed to curbing Shiite militias and integrating the former the form anti-jihadist militia al-Sahwa into the National Guard.

But everything seems to be otherwise now. As it turns out, the United States will send 13,000 servicemen to Camp Speicher, the largest military base in Iraq. The vice president of the governing council in the northern province of Saladin, Jassim Mohammed Hassan al-Attiyah, announced on 25 September that dozens of American military specialists are already at the base.

The American approach is changing like a kaleidoscope. Either the Americans are drawing up their plans or they have something other than destruction in mind, or not just destruction of the Islamic State group. How can a great power say in August that the name of the game is airstrikes in Iraq, in September add Syria to the target list, and then declare that it intends to conduct a massive ground operation? Something doesn't add up.

The way American allies are acting can shed some light on this inconsistency. It was on 25 September in a speech at the 69th UN General Assembly session that Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Saud al-Faisal, urged the international community to take "practical steps to weaken the Syrian regime," reiterating the need for the political isolation of the Assad administration. True to form, he asserted that in order to achieve that, the conflict in Syria must be ended through a political settlement basis on the Geneva communique. But al-Faisal had a peculiar conception of the Geneva political process: "Our support of the moderate Syrian opposition should not be limited to military support of counterterrorist groups in Syria but should also include practical steps to weaken the Syrian regime ... to deepen its political isolation and encourage defections in the ranks of the regime's civilian and military staff," he observed.
Even more interesting was some information of pan-Arabic newspaper Al-Hayat on 26 September. It stated that the position of Turkey, which had previously refused to participate in the anti-terrorist coalition, had undergone significant changes. Turkey reportedly is now disposed to join the coalition, a move that Ankara strongly opposed until just recently. At his most recent meeting with Barack Obama, Turkish President Recep Tayip Erdogan offered to have Turkish forces take part in operations in Syria in exchange for adoption of an “international resolution” for an isolation zone on Turkey-Syria border extending 30 kilometers into Syria and the simultaneous creation of a no-fly zone in that stretch. This is supposedly to “prevent Syrian refugees from coming into Turkey.” Erdogan explained that the fighting ought to lead to the weakening of the Assad regime, paving the way for him to give up power or be forced into an agreement on a political process. What Obama had on his mind, the Turkish leader had on his tongue!

Turkey’s opposition Republican People’s Party expressed doubts that the Security Council could come to such decision, considering the objections of Russia. But is said to have made it clear that such a scenario could be imposed through NATO if the United States, of course, is serious about that option.

Those leaks coincided with the Erdogan’s order to his military chief of staff to concentrate troops on the border to take in the waves of Syrian refugees and to make preparations for creating an isolation zone.

Curiously, according to the newspaper, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said that at the beginning of October, the government will seek authorization from the legislature for an extension of the Cabinet’s permission to insert troops into Iraq and Syria, which had been granted for the fight against the Kurds. Some Syrian opposition parties think it’s too late to do that because 1.5 million Syrian refugees are already in Turkey, and the Islamic State group has cells throughout the country.

So if we combine the evolution of the American statements about anti-terrorist operations with the statements made by al-Faisal and the Al-Hayat leaks, the chief goal of the operation organized by the United States in the Middle East ends up being the weakening and subsequent destruction of the Assad regime. The “anti-terrorism” wrapping paper was necessary to keep that goal from being revealed before its time and also to break the resistance of Russia, China and Iran, which, of course, cannot straight-up oppose the fight against terrorism. The truth is that they are not attracted to this fight, which heightens doubts about the real aim of the American charade.

The overthrow of Assad is a prerequisite for the United States to eject Russia from the region, weaken Iran, impose its conditions on the Iranian nuclear program, and tackle other items on its regional agenda. The crux is removing Assad, even at a cost of profound regional destabilization, to show once again that the world has not changed, that it remains unipolar, and that the United States the world’s rightful master, ready to act at its discretion.

This line of thinking is a complete failure, but to come to that realization, Washington apparently felt once again like diving neck-deep into the swamp of the Middle East.

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