To justify its interventionist actions in the Middle East, the United States, following the now cliched example, actively uses its alleged commitment to fighting against terrorism, focusing on countering such well-known terrorist formations as Al Qaeda and ISIS (both are banned in Russia). The same goes for the actions of the USA in Afghanistan. However, Washington didn’t take any accountability before the rest of the world about the results of this fight against terrorists in Afghanistan during its 20 years of abysmal military intervention.

At the same time, the Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov and foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova mentioned several times that Russia has sufficient facts backing the claims about the USA’s cooperation with the ISIS militants in the northern part of Afghanistan. In particular, since 2017, unmarked helicopter flights have been recorded within areas of ISIS militant activity, not without the explicit knowledge of US and NATO forces in their area of responsibility, especially in northern Afghanistan... According to Afghan sources, these aircraft have been used to deliver manpower, weapons, and ammunition to ISIS militants. Moreover, there were recorded instances of surgical strikes by the US Air Force not against terrorists, but positions of radical Taliban fighters (banned in Russia) engaged in combat against ISIS.

After the termination of the US military intervention in Afghanistan in August this year under the pressure of the international public and Americans themselves, certain American politico-military circles, clearly dissatisfied with
this step, started to spin the propaganda campaign about the allegedly intensified in recent months “danger of ISIS activity in Afghanistan” through their lackey media. With the apparent hope of triggering a new international armed aggression in Afghanistan, again under the “US patronage.”

Thus, on September 28 this year, General Mark A. Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced the supposedly obvious danger of strengthening of Al-Qaeda and ISIS (terrorist organizations, banned in Russia) positions in Afghanistan: “And we must remember that the Taliban was and remains a terrorist organization, and they still have not broken ties with al-Qaeda. I have no illusions about who we are dealing with.” “A reconstituted al-Qaeda or Daesh/ISIS with aspirations to attack the US is a very real possibility,” General continued.

The allegedly growing threat of ISIS in Afghanistan has recently been actively picked up by the American media, handy to the current military and political elite. In particular, recently The New York Times began to scare the world with stories that, since the Taliban came to power, ISIS militants in Afghanistan have intensified, their terrorist attacks are exhausting the new government and raising fears among Western powers of a potential revival of the group. During his speech in Congress, US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl admitted that the ability of Afghan authorities to combat the Islamists “has yet to be determined.” However, he did not say anything about who and when will determine the results of 20 years of fighting them by the United States itself.

The New York Times acknowledged that, after its disgraceful flight from Afghanistan in August, Washington had lost reliable access to intelligence. Limited drone flights now provide only partial information given the distance they need to travel to reach Afghanistan, and its established network of informants has been destroyed.

However, the real reason behind Washington’s new propaganda wave regarding the allegedly heightened threat of ISIS from Afghanistan becomes apparent in one of the final paragraphs of the article published by this newspaper. It states that the Taliban “refuse to cooperate with the United States in fighting ISIS by fighting the war on their terms.”

As for the organization of today’s fight against ISIS, Dr. Bashir, head of the Taliban’s intelligence services, has directly pointed out that such work is constantly being done, and his men have adopted the methods of this fight from their predecessors. Moreover, they even rely on Western equipment to intercept messages and radio communications. He insists, however, that the Taliban have something the past government and the Americans did not have: widespread local support that can alert authorities to attacks and militant positions, something that has always been hard to detect in the past.

As for some Western propagandists who attempt to use the thesis about the alleged merger of the Taliban with ISIS terrorists at the instigation of Washington, keep in mind that ISIS does not have such a strong influence in Afghanistan as the Taliban, and they are seen as antagonists in the country. The fact is that ISIS relies on Salafi ideology, while most Afghans identify themselves with the Hanafi school of fiqh. Therefore, the organization is a foreign body in the structure of Afghan society, which undoubtedly limits its growth of influence and popularity in the country.

As you know, ISIS announced the formation of the group in Iraq in 2014. Then came the ISIS affiliate in Pakistan. As for Afghanistan, a branch of ISIS emerged here in January 2015 under the Islamic State – Khorasan Province, which later the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan joined to (both of these terrorist movements are banned in the Russian Federation). In 2015, several regional media reports revealed that the National Directorate of Security (NDS), under complete USA control, had helped ISIS gain a foothold in Nangarhar province. There have also been reports that some leaders of the Afghan branch of ISIS, including Sheikh Abdul Rahim Muslim Dost (a former Guantanamo Bay detainee!), traveled in Afghan intelligence vehicles and lived in guesthouses belonging to Afghan intelligence agencies. Therefore, some analysts accuse US intelligence services of involvement in creating and strengthening ISIS in Afghanistan.

At a certain point, the Taliban viewed ISIS as temporary “allies” fighting against US intervention within Afghanistan. However, after ISIS demanded that Taliban leaders swear allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, clashes broke out between the Taliban and ISIS, especially in Nangarhar province. Notably, after such clashes broke out, government helicopters rescued ISIS fighters besieged by the Taliban in some areas, such as Jawzjan province. In particular, Afghan army helicopters supported by US forces evacuated ISIS fighters and their families and housed them in guesthouses in Sheberghan, Jawzjan province, belonging to Afghan intelligence. Afghan intelligence agencies implicitly acknowledged this.

The estimated number of ISIS fighters in Afghanistan is 5,000. A UN report released in mid-July said the number of
ISIS fighters in Afghanistan ranges from 500 to 1,500. Currently, ISIS does not possess heavy weapons, guns, and tanks, even though such equipment was abandoned in large numbers by the US army after fleeing Afghanistan, and has no centers, headquarters, or open fronts on Afghan soil. In these circumstances, ISIS can gain a foothold in Afghanistan only if some foreign patrons support it with people, arms, and money to use this organization to weaken the Taliban’s power and turn Afghanistan into a new breeding ground for terrorism. And here, one cannot rule out such actions precisely on the part of the United States and its Western allies. For example, Washington has done it before by supporting al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in its confrontation with the Soviet Union.

In a sense, former Afghan army and Afghan intelligence officers trained in the United States, who had already joined ISIS in Afghanistan in August after the US fled Afghanistan, could be used by the United States to manipulate ISIS. Their numbers, as admitted by The Wall Street Journal, “are still relatively small, but they are growing, according to those who know these people, and also according to Afghan and Taliban intelligence agencies.”

Today, the Taliban control the entire country and view ISIS as a foreign group to be fought and wholly expelled from Afghanistan. As for the restraints the Taliban has towards carrying out joint counter-terrorist actions against ISIS, confirmed by the Taliban on October 11 at the meeting with the Americans in Doha, one cannot rule out that it was Washington’s former ties with ISIS that could lie behind such a position of the current rulers of Afghanistan.

\textit{Valery Kulikov, political expert, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook“}.