

Shaping US Middle East Policy: It's Pentagon Who Calls the Shots Today

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Peter KORZUN | 06.04.2017 | [WORLD](#)

There are signs that the United States administration is deepening its military involvement in armed conflicts abroad, indicating a military-first approach. With no loud statements made to attract public attention, the US military footprint in the Middle East is gradually increasing. The military is given more decision-making authority to conduct combat operations in the region.

President Trump [has approved](#) a Defense Department's proposal to provide additional precision fires in support of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali security forces operations to defeat al-Shabaab in Somalia. This country had not been an active war zone. The operations needed high-level permissions to be carried out. It was changed on March 29, when the president signed a directive to declare Somalia an «area of active hostilities». Now field commanders can take decisions on their own for at least 180 days.

In January, the White House declared parts of three provinces in Yemen an «area of active hostilities», allowing the military greater flexibility. Defense Secretary James Mattis is [pushing](#) for the president to remove all restrictions on US military support for the Saudi invasion of Yemen, which would enable the military to support Emirati operations against the Houthis with surveillance and intelligence, refueling, and operational planning assistance, without asking for case-by-case top level approval. The president's final decision on Yemen is expected this week. The United States [has stepped up](#) its long-running drone campaign in that country.

The Defense Department [has been reported](#) to increase its presence in Syria before the Raqqa offensive. It [has moved](#) the forces closer to battle lines in Iraq. Around 400 Marines [have been reported](#) to be quietly deployed to northern Syria in support of the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces. Up to 300 more additional paratroopers [are deployed](#) to help the Iraqi military retake Mosul from the Islamic State (IS).

The military [is sending](#) additional 2,500 ground combat troops to a staging base in Kuwait from which they could be called upon to back up coalition forces battling the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

The defense officials [have asked](#) for substantial increase of forces in Afghanistan. The plans include [dozens of additional military advisers](#) deployed to the southern Helmand province in the coming weeks. The number of forces may greatly exceed the established caps as the personnel on temporary «non-enduring» assignments are not counted toward the overall numbers officially deemed to be serving in a country. There was no public debate whatsoever on the president's authorization to deploy more ground troops.

The new policy presupposes keeping information away from public as much as possible. It foresees no disclosures on the strength of troops deployed at the given moment in Syria and Iraq. The 2001 [Authorization for Use of Military Force](#) (AUMF) gives the administration the right to dispatch forces on temporary missions without asking Congress. [According to](#) Eric Pahon, a Pentagon spokesman, *«In order to maintain tactical surprise, ensure operational security and force protection, the coalition will not routinely announce or confirm information about the capabilities, force numbers, locations, or movement of forces in or out of Iraq and Syria»*.

Even when news of a deployment leaks, officials [will confirm](#) only the broad description of the unit size being deployed — such as a brigade, which can be between 3,200 and 4,000 troops.

Ned Price, National Security Council spokesman under Obama, [told](#) the *Los Angeles Times* that the move deprives the public of information it has a right to know about the wars in which the US is engaging. *«It's truly shocking that the current administration furtively deploys troops without public debate or describing their larger strategy»*, he said.

The policy of allowing lower level commanders to make independent airstrike decisions in densely populated areas is implemented at a time renewed concerns [are sparked](#) about civilian casualties from coalition airstrikes targeting IS fighters in Mosul. The casualties fuel anti-US sentiments. Leaving the decision-making process in the hands of military commanders may result in the political leadership losing control of operations. It brings to the fore the issue of de-confliction, especially in Syria.

The increase of military forces and the authority to act independently indicate the return to massive military presence in the region. It has its price to pay. The «military first» and «America first» are not always the same things. The involvement in the region has cost hundreds of billions of dollars. No Middle East country has become a Western-type democracy as a result. The 2003 invasion of Iraq turned the Greater Middle East into a mess, with never-ending sectarian-tinged power struggles, humanitarian disasters, and terrorist groups «spreading like a cancer» the emergence of failed states on the regional map.

The strategy of military involvement has fueled anti-American sentiments. None of the interventions in question, be it Yemen, Syria or Iraq, has been endorsed by the UN or conducted upon the invitation of the internationally recognized government. Even the liberation of Mosul or Raqqa will not be the end of the IS. The way to victory over terrorism lies in winning hearts and souls of the people, not airstrikes and special operations forces raids or retaking large urban areas. Besides, no unilateral action can lead to real success.

The opponents of the administration are stomping at the bit for delivering a heavy blow. They are looking for a pretext. There is a great probability that they will accuse Donald Trump of stepping on the same rake twice to get the US plunged into costly military adventures that make the «America first» weaker, not stronger.