

Pentagon tells US Senate wars will continue for decades

Alex Lantier
18 May 2013

Testifying before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services on Thursday, Pentagon officials claimed that “war on terror” legislation gives them sweeping powers to wage war anywhere in the world, including inside the United States, without congressional authorization.

Assistant Defense Secretary Michael Sheehan argued that the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), passed by Congress after the September 11 attacks, constituted effective congressional authorization for future wars waged under the rubric of the “war on terror.” In his view, the Pentagon can continue its global campaign of drone assassination strikes and launch further wars under the heading of the “war on terror” without renewed authorization from Congress.

“At this point, we’re comfortable with the AUMF as it is currently structured,” Sheehan said. “Right now ... it serves its purpose.”

Sheehan made clear that he believed this authorization of war extended into the indefinite future. He said, “In my judgment, this is going to go on for quite a while, yes, beyond the second term of the president ... I think it’s at least 10 to 20 years.”

Sheehan’s position represents a flagrant rejection of the US Constitution. Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution specifies: “The Congress shall have power ... to declare War, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and make Rules concerning Captures on Land and Water.” However, top Pentagon officials are effectively asserting that Congress’ power will be indefinitely superseded by the president and the military, who can launch limitless wars at will.

While the issue is publicly presented as a debate over revising the AUMF, powerful sections of the American ruling class are in fact moving to suspend key

provisions of the US Constitution and install a presidential-military dictatorship. In response to questioning from friendly senators, the Pentagon officials indicated that they believe the AUMF allows the executive to unilaterally invade other countries and wage war inside the United States.

Senator Lindsey Graham asked whether the current AUMF gave US President Barack Obama the authority to put “boots on the ground” in Yemen in the Middle East, or the Congo in Africa. The Pentagon’s acting general counsel, Robert Taylor, said that it did.

“Would you agree with me, the battlefield is anywhere the enemy chooses to make it?” Graham asked.

Sheehan replied, “Yes sir, from Boston to FATA,”—referring to Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a key target of US drone strikes, and the decision to put the entire city of Boston on lockdown after the April 15 Boston Marathon bombings.

In his prepared testimony, moreover, Sheehan wrote that “being a US citizen does not immunize a member of the enemy from attack” by US forces. With this comment, Sheehan was aligning the Pentagon with the US drone assassination of Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen, on September 30, 2011. Washington gave no evidence that Awlaki was planning or executing any attack on the United States before murdering him with a Hellfire missile.

This follows public speculation earlier this year by US Attorney General Eric Holder about extra-judicially murdering US citizens on US soil in the course of counter-terrorism operations.

The entire framework of the Senate hearing testified to the deep decay of American democracy. The AUMF itself is an anti-democratic document, authorizing the

president to use force against any “nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations.”

While the AUMF was cynically presented as being directed against Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, Washington took it as a blank check to wage unpopular wars and order assassinations throughout the world.

This pretext was fundamentally fraudulent, in that these policies were not primarily directed at Al Qaeda. They aimed to install neo-colonial rule in the Middle East, where most countries played no role in launching the September 11 attacks, in order to seize control of key oil resources and strengthen Washington’s geo-strategic position vis-à-vis other major powers. They also were aimed at suppressing popular opposition to such policies in the American working class by creating a climate of fear and intimidation.

The shifting needs of US imperialist policy over the last 12 years have exploded the pretext that its wars are justified by the AUMF. Many Al Qaeda-affiliated groups Washington is attacking, such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, did not exist in 2001 and played no role in the September 11 attacks. Washington even uses others, such as the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and the Al Nusra Front in Syria, as allies of convenience in its wars for regime change in these countries.

The Pentagon has responded by asserting that the AUMF also grants it the authority to wage war on “associated forces,” though the term does not appear in the text of the AUMF. This provoked questions and even certain criticisms from the senators.

Senator Angus King noted, “You guys have essentially rewritten the Constitution here ... You guys have invented this term, associated forces, and it renders the war powers of Congress null and void.” He added, “I’m just a little old lawyer from Brunswick, Maine, but I don’t see how you can possibly read this to be in comport with the Constitution.”

Senator John McCain said that when the Senate voted for the AUMF in 2001, “None of us could have envisioned [granting] authority [for war] in Yemen and Somalia ... For you to come here and say we don’t need to change [the AUMF] or revise it, I think is, well, disturbing.”

Senator Joe Donnelly raised Al Nusra in the Senate hearing and asked whether by affiliating to Al Qaeda—as Al Nusra has done—a group automatically could be considered a threat to the United States.

Sheehan replied, “Yes sir, although it’s a bit murky, I hate to say, because there are groups that have openly professed their affiliation with Al Qaeda yet, in fact, as a government we haven’t completely grappled with that as of now.”

Nonetheless, all the senators stressed their basic agreement with the fraudulent framework of the “war on terror.” King stressed, “I don’t disagree that we need to fight terrorism.”

McCain told the Pentagon officials, “I don’t blame you because basically you’ve got carte blanche as to what you are going to do around the world.”

These comments expose the political reality that the only constituency for democracy in the United States is to be found in the working class. Even as the AUMF and the “war on terror” are publicly exposed as pretexts for the US military to unconstitutionally seize immense powers, the political establishment continues to support the Pentagon in order to further the strategic interests of US imperialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact