Kerry, Carter, Dempsey testify at Senate hearing

Obama administration seeks wider war powers

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12 March 2015

The three top US national security officials appeared together before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Wednesday to press the case for a broadly worded resolution authorizing the war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Secretary of State John Kerry, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter and General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made brief statements and answered questions from Republican and Democratic senators during a three-hour hearing.

The session focused on a proposed Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) to approve the military operations launched by President Obama last August in Iraq and the following month in Syria. More than 3,000 US troops have been deployed to the region to train Iraqi Army and Syrian "rebel" forces, and US warplanes have killed thousands in a nonstop bombing campaign against ISIS targets in the two countries.

The Obama administration submitted a proposed three-page text for the AUMF only last month, more than six months after the air strikes and troop deployment began. The delay is unprecedented and underscores the increasingly open contempt of the military-intelligence apparatus for the formal trappings of democratic governance, including the constitutional prerogative of the legislature to declare war.

The White House initially refused to draft language for a resolution to approve the war against ISIS, claiming Obama had ample authority under two earlier resolutions: the AUMF of 2001, which was the basis of the war in Afghanistan and the subsequent "war on terror," and the AUMF adopted in October 2002, which gave approval for the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq in March of 2003.

This claim is entirely specious. The 2001 AUMF gave the president authority to wage war against those who carried out the 9/11 attacks or harbored the perpetrators. ISIS did not even exist until a decade later, and it is actually at war with the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria, the al-Nusra Front. Even more cynical is the claim that the 2002 AUMF for war *against* Iraq provides a legal basis for a war in which Iraq serves as a puppet and ally of Washington.

The new AUMF drafted by the White House would repeal the 2002 Iraq war resolution but leave the 2001 war resolution unaltered. At Wednesday's hearing, Secretary of State Kerry and Secretary of Defense Carter reiterated the administration's contention that the war against ISIS is legal under the 2001 AUMF and that a new resolution is desirable but not essential.

In his opening statement, which was twice interrupted by antiwar protesters who were ejected from the hearing by Capitol Hill police, Kerry asserted, "The president already has statutory authority to act against ISIL, but a clear and formal expression of this Congress's backing at this moment in time would dispel doubt that might exist anywhere that Americans are united in this effort."

The main purpose of the resolution, he said, was to make a political demonstration of bipartisan unity behind the US war plan. "Your unity would also send an unmistakable message to the leaders [of ISIS]," he told the committee. "They have to understand they cannot divide us…and they have no hope of defeating us."

The new resolution would also reassure US allies in the bombing campaign in Syria, including nearly all the repressive monarchies and sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf, he said, but as far as US military actions went, it would have a purely symbolic significance. Asked directly about this later in the hearing, General Dempsey affirmed that the new AUMF would not change anything in the operations being conducted by US forces in Iraq and Syria.

These declarations, which went largely unchallenged by the Senate panel, gave the entire hearing the character of a farce. In effect, the representatives of the executive branch told the legislature that their concerns and questions, let alone the sentiments of the American people, were irrelevant. Congress could choose to rubber-stamp the new US war in Iraq and Syria or refuse to do so, but congressional action would have no effect on the actual course of events.

Committee Chairman Bob Corker, a Republican from Tennessee, admitted before the hearing, "I think we all know, at present, whether we pass an AUMF or don't pass an AUMF has zero effect on what is happening on the ground, none, zero."

This marks a further stage in the decomposition of what passes for democracy in the United States. Even the Bush administration felt compelled to obtain congressional authorization for war, albeit on the basis of lies about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" and ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda (who were actually bitter enemies).

Under Obama, the national security apparatus has gone a step further, waging war without a shred of constitutional or legal

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legitimacy, counting on the acquiescence or active support of both capitalist parties in Congress, as well as the corporate-controlled media.

Much of Wednesday's hearing was taken up with wrangling between Republican senators opposing any limits on the war—for example, the three-year time limit stipulated in the administration's draft AUMF, after which Congress would have to reauthorize the war—and Democrats expressing reservations about a new US ground war in the Middle East.

Defense Secretary Carter repeatedly explained that the three-year time limit was not an estimate of the duration of the war, but simply an acknowledgement that by 2017 there will be a new US president facing a different world security environment.

Secretary of State Kerry emphasized the administration's opposition to any limitation on the geographic scope of the war. "What a mistake it would be," he declared, "to send a message to [ISIS] that there are safe havens, that there is somehow just a two-country limitation…"

There was tedious parsing of the resolution's ban on "enduring offensive ground combat operations," which General Dempsey conceded had no precise legal meaning or military significance. One senator suggested that a conflict on the scale of the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War would be permissible under that language, since the deployment of nearly 700,000 American troops lasted only seven months (hence, not "enduring") and was ostensibly in defense of Kuwait (hence, not "offensive").

None of these limitations would have the slightest practical or even legal effect, according to the Obama administration, if the 2001 war resolution also remains in effect. Any action forbidden by the 2015 AUMF could be undertaken anyway under the 2001 AUMF. That is why the White House is flatly opposed to suggestions that the 2001 AUMF should be repealed.

Two further issues emerged toward the end of the hearing. Under questioning from committee chairman Corker, General Dempsey said that the Pentagon views as a "positive thing" the support given by Iran to the Iraqi offensive against Tikrit in northern Iraq. Iran has armed and directed Shiite militias that are the spearhead of that offensive, which could result in sectarian massacres of the predominately Sunni local population.

Corker pressed the administration witnesses on whether the war resolution would permit US forces to act in defense of their Syrian "rebel" clients if they came under attack by Syrian military units loyal to President Bashar al-Assad. General Dempsey replied, "The answer to that is 'no.' The administration has not added a Syrian regime or an Assad component to the AUMF."

The senator indicated he favored adding anti-Assad language to the resolution, and none of the administration officials objected. Corker also asked why the administration had not given its support to a Turkish proposal to establish a "no-fly zone" in Syria, a move that would pave the way for a direct US military intervention against the Assad regime. Dempsey replied that the US was considering that option.

These exchanges point to the ultimate purpose of the US intervention against ISIS, which is the overthrow of Assad and the establishment of a US puppet regime in Damascus.

The senior Democrat on the panel, Robert Menendez of New Jersey, a war hawk of the first order in relation to Iran and Cuba, nonetheless sought to pose as an opponent of a new Middle East war on the scale of Iraq or Afghanistan. "What I don't think Democrats are willing to do, is give the president an open authorization for war or a blank check," he said.

The thrust of the resolution, however, is to authorize virtually open-ended warfare by the US military in any country targeted by Obama or his successor. Several senators suggested during the hearing that the AUMF would constitute a green light for US military action in Nigeria against Boko Haram, an Islamist guerrilla group that this week publicly pledged allegiance to ISIS, and to renewed US military operations in Libya, where Islamist militias claiming ISIS affiliation carried out beheadings of Coptic Christians.

None of the administration witnesses rejected these examples as possible venues for war, merely observing that the president would have to determine that targeted groups were both affiliated to ISIS and actively threatening to attack the United States or its allies. Given Kerry's boast that "62 nations" were engaged in the US-led coalition against ISIS, the number of "allies" where US troops might be deployed under the new AUMF has grown exponentially.

No senator in either party is opposed to another imperialist war. The issues in dispute revolve around tactics—air power versus ground troops—and concerns that another massive US military deployment on the scale of Iraq and Afghanistan could ignite popular opposition both in the Middle East and at home.

There are also those—including the three top officials who testified Wednesday—who see looming conflicts with Russia over Ukraine and with China throughout the Asia-Pacific region as more important from the standpoint of the world position of American imperialism. In this view, the war with ISIS is significant but distinctly subordinate.

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