

Pentagon exercises free rein in global military escalation

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Two months into the administration of Donald Trump, the US military is involved in a relentless military escalation from the Baltic Sea in Eastern Europe to Central Asia, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. The “war on terror” launched by the Bush administration more than fifteen years ago, having already turned much of the region into a slaughterhouse, is taking an even deadlier turn.

In extraordinary testimony to a US Congressional panel, the top military commander of US forces in the Middle East and Central Asia essentially laid out a proposal for the buildup to war against Iran, even as the Pentagon is steadily escalating a murderous bombing campaign that has killed hundreds if not thousands of civilians in Iraq and Syria.

Gen. Joseph Votel, the chief of the US Central Command, told the House Armed Services Committee Wednesday that Iran “poses the greatest long-term threat to security in this part of the world” and demanded that Washington act to “disrupt [Iran] through military means or other means.” He added, “We need to look at opportunities where we can expose and hold them accountable for the things that they are doing,” while calling into question the 2015 nuclear agreement signed by Iran, the US and the other major powers.

Votel went on to present the case for an expanded US military intervention in Yemen, declaring that “there are vital US interests at stake” in this, the most impoverished Arab country, where Saudi Arabia and its allies have waged a near-genocidal war against the population using American weapons along with indispensable US intelligence and logistical support. The remark came as the Pentagon is preparing to back an offensive by the Emirati military aimed at capturing a Red Sea port that constitutes Yemen’s last link between the outside world and its starving population.

Finally, Votel told the US congressman that the

Pentagon is preparing to substantially increase the number of US troops in Afghanistan—the US commander there has suggested that as many as 5,000 more soldiers be sent into the more than 15-year-old war.

In the same breath, Votel asserted that it is “fair to assume” that Russia is “providing some sort of support to [the Taliban], in terms of weapons or other things that may be there.” That no one has presented any evidence to validate such an assumption did nothing to mask the significance of the US commander’s remarks. The US intervention in Afghanistan is part of a military strategy aimed at confronting Washington’s key rivals for regional and global hegemony: Russia, China and Iran.

Votel’s testimony came just a day after the chief of the US European Command, Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, told the same Congressional panel that he wants another full US armored division—as many as 20,000 US troops equipped with Abrams main battle tanks, infantry combat vehicles as well as missile systems and Apache and Black Hawk helicopters—permanently deployed on Russia’s western borders. In addition, he called for an increased presence of US warships near the country’s shores—“It would be wonderful to have a carrier support group with amphibious forces”—as well as the provision of “lethal” weapons to the right-wing nationalist regime in Ukraine.

Denouncing Russia for its “aggression” and “malign activities,” he described Moscow as “a very lethal, tough enemy.” Never mind that the \$54 billion increase that President Donald Trump has proposed for the Pentagon budget is the equivalent of 80 percent of Russia’s military spending.

A week earlier, the head of the US Africa Command, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, called for the Trump administration to lift the controls restricting US military operations in Somalia to pave the way for a full-scale American intervention in that impoverished African nation. The AP reported yesterday that the Trump

administration has granted this request.

Functioning as 21st century proconsuls, these US regional commanders are increasingly dictating the key elements of US foreign policy. This is not an innovation introduced under the Trump administration, but rather has built up steadily over the course of a quarter century of unending US wars under both Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

Nonetheless, there are increasing indications that the Trump White House, which has installed an active-duty Army general as its national security advisor and two recently retired Marine generals as secretaries of defense and homeland security, has given a free rein to the military in conducting lethal operations abroad.

This has found its starkest expression in the murderous offensive being conducted by the Pentagon in Syria and Iraq, with US bombs reducing entire residential neighborhoods in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, to rubble, and killing innocent civilians in attacks on mosques and schools in Syria.

Allowing new "rules of engagement" that make mass civilian casualties inevitable, Washington is unceremoniously dispensing with whatever "human rights" window dressing was attached to the US interventions under the Obama administration, even as it pursued the same essential policy.

As much was acknowledged by a former senior Pentagon official under Obama, Andrew Exum, who commented recently, "Potentially, by giving field commanders more leeway to exploit opportunities on the battlefield, the Trump administration can execute the Obama administration's strategy more efficiently."

While cynically lamenting the "tragedy" of this efficient slaughter of civilians in Mosul, US commanders have made it clear that new and even worse atrocities are still to come. "As we move into the urban environment, it is going to become more and more difficult to apply extraordinarily high standards for things we are doing, although we will try," Votel told the House Armed Services Committee Wednesday.

Earlier, the chief of US operations in Iraq and Syria, Gen. Stephen Townsend, described the Mosul operation as "the most significant urban combat to take place since World War II", characterizing it as "tough and brutal."

The bulk of the brutality is now coming from the more than 500 bombs that US warplanes have dropped on the city every single week this month.

Urban combat, it should be noted, has been a key focus of US military planners in recent years. Quoting remarks

by Gen. Mark Milley, the US Army's chief of staff, at a "Future of War" conference held last week, *Military.com* reported, "If war is about politics, it is going to be fought where people live, and 'it will be fought, in my opinion, in urban areas,' Milley said. 'That has huge implications for the United States Army.'"

The terrorized population of Mosul—including an estimated 600,000 children—is being used as guinea pigs by the US military in preparing its forces for such operations, which it sees as inevitable given the vast social polarization created by the profit system. Such future urban battles, it is well aware, will be waged not only in war-torn countries in Africa and the Middle East, but in America's own cities.

What is most extraordinary is the absence of any organized opposition to the military bloodbath that is being systematically implemented, and that contains within it the seeds of world war. Within the political establishment, the parade of generals testifying before Congress meets nothing but fawning praise from Democrats and Republicans alike. The organizations that orbit the Democratic Party, and once professed opposition to war, remain silent or, more often, do what they can to provide the humanitarian or "left" justifications for imperialist slaughter.

In the final analysis, the immense power and influence of the US military and its senior commanders notwithstanding, the drive to world war is rooted not in the unleashing of the generals by Trump, but in the crisis of global capitalism and the irresolvable contradiction between world economy and the division of the globe into rival nation-states that is driving every capitalist power to rearmament and militarism, with Washington leading the pack.



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