General lets slip US escalation in Syria

Bill Van Auken
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Asked at televised briefing Tuesday for the number of US troops presently deployed in Syria, US Army Maj. Gen. James Jarrard, the commander of the Special Operations Joint Task Force deployed in both Syria and Iraq, told Pentagon reporters that the number was "a little over 4,000."

The figure took the assembled members of the media aback. It had recently been reported that over 1,000 troops were on the ground in the illegal US intervention in the Middle Eastern nation, twice the official ceiling set by the Obama administration and ostensibly maintained under President Donald Trump.

In April, however, the Trump administration announced that it was turning over to the military brass the authority to set troop limits as it sees fit, allowing for rapid and unannounced escalations of the US interventions in the Middle East. Similar authority has been given to the generals in relation to the 16-year-old war in Afghanistan.

When the reporter repeated the general's figure of 4,000 US troops in Syria and pointed out that previous reports had indicated closer to 1,000, the general stumbled briefly and, apparently receiving a rapid correction over his earpiece, said, "I'm sorry, I misspoke there; there are approximately 500 troops in Syria."

What remains unanswered is whether the general "just made a mistake," as the Pentagon later claimed, or inadvertently revealed that the actual number of US soldiers and Marines intervening in Syria has quadrupled in recent months. Previously there were credible estimates by military analysts that the number of troops had grown to 2,000.

The additions to the official ceiling of 503 troops have been hard to conceal. US Marine artillery units have been deployed in Syria to aid in the decimation of Raqqa and other population centers. Army Rangers have been photographed storming across the north of the country in Stryker combat vehicles, while attack helicopters and their crews have been heavily involved in combat.

Earlier this year, the Pentagon revealed that the real number of US troops in Afghanistan exceeded 11,000, rather than the 8,400 previously reported to the public in a deliberate undercount maintained with the complicity of the US media. The revelation came as the Trump administration gave the military brass free rein to escalate Washington's longest war. While another 4,000 US troops are reportedly being sent, Trump and his defense secretary, former Marine Gen. James Mattis, have insisted that the exact number be kept secret so as not to "tip off the enemy."

The wall of secrecy surrounding the Afghanistan intervention grew higher this week, with the US military's censoring of a quarterly report issued for the last nine years by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) to monitor the efficacy of the hundreds of billions of dollars spent in the subjugation of the South Asian nation. This has coincided with the report that the CIA has been authorized for the first time to carry out drone strikes and organize "hunt and kill" militias, a shift of what had been military functions to the US intelligence agency.

Frequently, the CIA carries out such operations using not only its own covert forces, but also military personnel. The sole motive for placing them under CIA control is to throw a mantle of secrecy over some of the most murderous actions being carried out against the Afghan people.

Then there is Niger, where the deaths of four Green Berets in a fire fight early last month cast a bright light on what had previously been a war fought in the shadows, with some 1,000 US troops deployed in the central West African country and on its borders, an intervention that leading members of the US Senate

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claimed to have known nothing about. Whatever the sincerity of these claims, the politicians clearly understood that the war in Niger and the spreading tentacles of AFRICOM, the US military's continental command, overseeing some 6,000 US troops spread across 24 African nations, were well-kept secrets as far as the American people are concerned.

The Pentagon has made it clear that the military intervention in Africa's Sahel region will only intensify. This was underscored by the statement of Niger's prime minister, Brigi Rafini, that his government is prepared to allow US drones to carry out armed attacks on the country's territory.

Behind the lies and secrecy about troop deployments from West Africa, through the Middle East and into South Asia there is the bigger lie as to the purpose of these interventions, all of which are justified in the name of a never-ending "war on terror."

The Syrian intervention exposes the utter duplicity of this claim. The fact is that Washington has been a chief sponsor of terrorism against the Syrian people, funneling over $1 billion in arms and money to Islamist militias linked to Al Qaeda in a bloody war for regime-change. Its key regional allies, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, poured in billions more to ignite a war that has killed hundreds of thousands and turned millions into refugees.

The expansion of US deployments in Syria is directed not against ISIS, which has collapsed, but at seizing territory, particularly the oil fields of eastern Deir Ezzor province, in order to undermine the Assad government and combat the regional influence of its main allies, Iran and Russia.

Similar considerations underlie the US intervention in Afghanistan, where American imperialism seeks to maintain its military hold over a strategic region bordering the oil-rich Caspian Basin, as well as the US presence in Niger. The latter is part of a broader attempt to counter China's rise as the African continent's chief trading partner through the use of US military force.

All of these regional conflicts have the potential of metastasizing into a full-blown world war pitting US imperialism against nuclear-armed Russia and China.

Despite the feigned shock of American senators over American military operations in Niger, there is no appetite within Congress to assert that body's constitutional power to declare war, something it long ago surrendered to the White House and the Pentagon.

At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing Monday, the US defense secretary, Gen. "Mad Dog" Mattis, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made it clear that while Congress is welcome to pass a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to provide a legal fig leaf for Washington's global wars and interventions, they have no problem continuing the fiction that the 2001 AUMF passed in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks justifies all of these actions as well as any future acts of aggression.

In the midst of a growing war danger, with the power to order military escalation placed firmly in the hands of a cabal of right-wing former and current generals, the Democratic Party has mounted no opposition to the Trump administration on the question of war. On the contrary, it has worked in tandem with the Pentagon and the CIA to wage a campaign of anti-Russia hysteria aimed at paving the way for a new and far more terrible conflagration.

There exists within the US ruling establishment no constituency whatsoever for either reining in the US military or upholding fundamental democratic rights. The struggle against war and the threat of dictatorship requires the building of a new mass antiwar movement based on a socialist program to mobilize the working class internationally against the capitalist system.

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