

US military, Trump administration claim unlimited powers to wage war in Syria

Patrick Martin
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The Trump administration has asserted the power to expand the US war in Syria and effectively annex and occupy significant portions of the country without even the pretense of international authorization, congressional sanction or public debate.

The *New York Times* reported the position, laid out in letters to Senator Tim Kaine from the Pentagon and the State Department, in a news article buried in its inside pages on Friday under the headline “Administration Says Syria Forces Don’t Need New Approval.” The letters underscore the dimensions of the assault on the Constitution by the White House, which is asserting inherent executive power to wage war not only in Syria, but by implication all over the world.

Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, has advanced a pro forma and hypocritical call for passage of a new Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) to provide a legal fig leaf for war in Syria directed at bringing down the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The current US military escalation in Syria is the realization of a principal demand of the Democratic Party. It was at the center of the foreign policy agenda of the Hillary Clinton presidential campaign—Kaine was Clinton’s vice-presidential running mate—and would have been one of Clinton’s first acts as president. Just this past week, the *Times* published an editorial demanding an escalation of the war, complaining that Syria, Russia and Iran “have exploited the battlefield successes against ISIS...as the leaders of the United States and other world powers largely stand by, unwilling or unable to do anything to stop it.”

According to the Pentagon letter, ongoing operations in Syria still fall within the framework of the supposed campaign to defeat ISIS, even though all cities and towns controlled by ISIS have been retaken. The Trump administration, as with the Obama administration before

it, advances the absurd claim that the “war against ISIS” is justified by the 2001 AUMF against Al Qaeda, adopted more than 16 years ago, providing congressional sanction for the invasion of Afghanistan.

“The campaign to defeat ISIS is transitioning to a new phase in Iraq and Syria,” the letter asserts. The US military “is optimizing and adapting our military presence to maintain counterterrorism pressure on the enemy, while facilitating stabilization and political reconciliation efforts needed to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS.”

These assertions are so sweeping—and subject to such arbitrary and subjective interpretation—as to justify an indefinite US military occupation of Syria.

The Pentagon and State Department letters concede that neither Syrian government forces nor their allies such as Hezbollah and Iran can be considered “associated forces” of ISIS or Al Qaeda, as required under the 2001 war resolution. Instead, US attacks on Syrian government forces and their allies are characterized as acts of “self-defense” by American military forces, even though the US is in Syria in the first place in violation of its sovereignty and without the consent of its government.

Even more ominous is the legal justification advanced for the missile strike Trump ordered against a Syrian airbase last April, after a US-led media campaign claiming that the Syrian government had used nerve gas on a town in Idlib province held by anti-Assad forces. According to the Pentagon letter, “the President authorized that strike pursuant to his power under Article II of the Constitution as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive to use this sort of military force overseas to defend important US national interests.”

This language is entirely open-ended and makes a mockery of the US constitutional structure, under which the power to declare war is reserved to Congress, while the president serves as commander-in-chief to direct the military operations authorized by the legislature. This

constitutional separation of powers has fallen into disuse over a protracted period, as American democracy has drastically eroded. It is more than 75 years since the last congressional declaration of war, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

However, even during the last quarter century of nearly continuous US warfare, it was felt necessary, for the purposes of manipulating public opinion, to obtain congressional sanction for a major US military commitment. Congressional debates and votes, not on a formal declaration of war, but to authorize the president to use military force, preceded the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991, the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Significantly, it was two Democratic administrations that engaged in full-scale war without even a pretense of congressional approval. President Bill Clinton ordered the US-NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 but failed to win the support of a Republican-controlled Congress. President Barack Obama launched the US-NATO bombing of Libya in 2011 without even attempting to secure a vote in the Democratic-controlled Senate. Both Democrats claimed inherent presidential powers.

Now, behind the cover of lying phrases about human rights and cynical denunciations of the “butcher” Assad (identical to earlier denunciations of the “butchers” Milosevic, Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi), the United States is carrying out what amounts to the annexation of a strategically significant section of Syria. This is only a preliminary step, to be followed by the transformation of the entire country into a de facto colony of the United States.

These actions of the United States vindicate Lenin’s statement, written in 1916, that imperialism is characterized by “the striving to annex ... *every kind of country*” (“Imperialism and the Split in Socialism,” *Collected Works*, Moscow, 1977, Volume 23, p. 107).

Moreover, as Lenin warned, the process of colonial enslavement of weaker countries by the imperialist powers is inexorably linked to the obliteration of democratic forms of rule at home. “Political reaction *all along* the line is a characteristic feature of imperialism,” he wrote. “Corruption, bribery on a huge scale and all kinds of fraud” (*ibid*, p. 106).

That a major military occupation can be launched without any public debate and with no opposition within the political establishment reveals the terminal rot of American democracy. Decisions are made unilaterally by the military and intelligence agencies with the most far-

reaching consequences for the population of the Middle East, the United States and the entire world.

The absence of organized opposition to the military occupation of Syria also exposes the role of the organizations of the pseudo-left, groups claiming to be socialist that are nothing more than apologists and advocates for imperialist butchery. Groups such as the International Socialist Organization operate as appendages of the Democratic Party. They have backed the US military intervention in Syria, only bemoaning the supposed reluctance of Obama and now Trump to carry out all-out war against Damascus.

The Syrian civil war has metastasized into a conflict drawing in regional and global powers, including Russia, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Israel, in addition to the United States. Earlier this month, under circumstances that remain murky, US warplanes attacked a pro-Syrian government force comprised of Russian mercenaries or soldiers, killing as many as 200 men. If the Putin government has not made a serious protest, it is only because Moscow fears the explosive consequences of a full-scale military conflict between American and Russian forces, with the potential for escalation into a broader war between the world’s two most heavily armed nuclear powers.

The Syrian powder keg is only one of a number of conflicts that can rapidly become the occasion for an explosion of imperialist war, including North Korea, Iran, the South China Sea, Ukraine and the Baltic states, to name only the most obvious. There is an urgent necessity to build an independent movement of the international working class against the war drive of the imperialist powers, above all the United States. This is the task being undertaken by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, through the building of revolutionary parties of the working class in every country.



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