

US Raises Troop Deployment in Afghanistan by 1,000

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NATO's International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) Joint Command, which has overseen the 13-year-long US-led war in Afghanistan, formally ceased operations in Kabul Monday amid declarations that the combat role for American and allied troops has ended.

The flag-lowering ceremony, however, was eclipsed by announcements and decisions from Washington making it clear that the active US military intervention in the impoverished country is continuing and plans for the drawdown of American forces are being revised accordingly.

This was spelled out in last weekend's farewell trip to Afghanistan by the Obama administration's outgoing secretary of defense, Chuck Hagel, who confirmed earlier reports that the Pentagon is altering a timetable and rules of engagement established by President Barack Obama in a Rose Garden speech last May promising to "bring America's longest war to a responsible end."

While Obama had promised that by the end of 2014 the total number of US troops deployed in Afghanistan would be cut to 9,800, Hagel confirmed that an additional 1,000 soldiers would be left behind, meaning that "up to 10,800 troops, rather than 9,800, could remain in Afghanistan through the end of this year and for the first few months of 2015."

Described by Pentagon officials as a "bridging solution," the additional US troops are supposedly being kept in place to compensate for the delay in getting commitments from other NATO powers to deploy military forces in Afghanistan.

This delay in turn is blamed on the protracted dispute over the presidential election, resolved only in September through a US-brokered power-sharing deal between the two candidates, Ashraf Ghani, the former IMF official who has become president, and Abdullah Abdullah, a former foreign minister who has been given the title of "chief executive." The difficulty in constituting a new government held back the signing of a Bilateral Security Agreement with Washington and a Status of Forces Agreement with NATO.

Former Afghan President Hamid Karzai had refused to sign the deals, which provide legal authorization for the country's continued occupation by Western troops and, crucially, a guarantee that they cannot be held accountable in Afghan courts, providing effective immunity in cases of war crimes against the Afghan people.

The stated central mission of the US and allied troops is to "train, advise and assist" Afghan security forces, which are supposedly taking full responsibility for the continuing war against

the Taliban and other forces hostile to the regime in Kabul and its foreign patrons.

Obama, in his statement last May, allowed that US forces would be assigned to only two “narrow missions”: training Afghan forces and “supporting counterterrorism operations against the remnants of Al Qaeda.”

Hagel, however, unveiled a third. He said that US forces would “take appropriate measures against Taliban members who directly threaten US and coalition forces in Afghanistan or provide direct support to Al Qaeda.”

In other words, the war will go on, and American troops are to continue fighting and dying to keep a US puppet government in power in Kabul.

There are undoubtedly difficulties in getting other NATO member states to contribute troops to Afghanistan, and the delays in getting an agreement with the Kabul regime has had an impact on the timetable set by the Obama White House. This plan calls for the number of US troops to fall to 5,500 by the end of 2015 when the American intervention will, in the words of US commander Gen. John Campbell, become “Kabul-centric,” abandoning bases and training missions elsewhere in the country.

There are, however, more pressing concerns than the recent delays. The Taliban has carried out a growing number of attacks throughout the country, making 2014 the bloodiest year since the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001. The Afghan security forces will have suffered close to 5,000 fatalities in 2014—significantly more than the total number of US and other foreign troops killed over the past 13 years—losses that a number of military advisers have described as unsustainable.

Moreover, when Obama made his announcement last May, he vowed that the US would draw down its forces until they consisted of no more than embassy security and a military assistance mission “just as we have done in Iraq.” The events of the subsequent months have given these words an ominous ring.

The debacle suffered by the US-trained Iraqi security forces at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has caused the US military brass to question whether the same scenario could unfold in Afghanistan and to demand more “flexibility” in terms of continued US operations in the country. This means that the troop levels spelled out earlier by the president are merely targets, not ceilings, and can be altered by the Pentagon according to the situation on the ground.

The Afghan security forces remain dependent upon the US military for air support, intelligence and logistics, not to mention funding.

President Ghani has lifted a ban on night raids imposed by his predecessor Karzai because of the high number of civilian casualties inflicted in these operations and the intense hatred for foreign forces they provoked among Afghans. Their resumption will undoubtedly involve US Special Forces troops operating together with Afghan units and backed by American air power.

The talk of an end to combat in Afghanistan notwithstanding, the war goes on. While Ghani has held out the prospect of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, the movement is continuing its offensive, overrunning a police station in southern Afghanistan even as the ISAF flag-lowering ceremony was taking place in Kabul.

“The Americans want to extend their mission in Afghanistan, the motive being to keep the war going for as long as possible,” Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told the Associated Press. “And for as long as they do, the Taliban will continue their fight against the foreign and [Afghan] government forces.”

The human cost of the continued US occupation was driven home again last Saturday with the killing of two civilians in the Daman district of southern Kandahar province. A car apparently drove too close to a US military convoy causing soldiers to suddenly open fire, killing two of its occupants.

“An unauthorized vehicle attempted to enter a secure area in southern Afghanistan,” ISAF explained in what presumably is among its last statements. “After several visual and other warnings to stop were ignored, escalation of force was required.”

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