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Trump's Wars

By Emma Ashford
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President Donald Trump is no stranger to conflict escalation. In his short time in office, he has managed to successfully escalate disputes against the media, immigrants and the intelligence community. Yet Trump's most important escalation has been in the War on Terror, substantially increasing the U.S. commitment to wars in Yemen, Syria and elsewhere. Unfortunately, these steps are likely only to draw America deeper into some of the world's most intractable conflicts.

Trump's foreign policy approach during the campaign can be charitably described as incoherent. On the one hand, he openly admitted that the Iraq war had been a mistake, and repeatedly criticized the money wasted on pointless Middle East conflicts. These ideas, unorthodox for a Republican candidate but popular with the general public, helped to win him votes.

But on the other hand, candidate Trump often contradicted himself, calling for the use of overwhelming force in the fight against the Islamic State group, and promising a massive increase in U.S. military spending. The candidate's militaristic worldview frequently came through in his off-the-cuff remarks, most memorably when he told a rally of supporters, "I love war, in a certain way."

The president is doubling down on the Middle East quagmires he once criticized.

Sadly, since his inauguration, Trump has pursued the second of these two approaches. This choice — escalating U.S. involvement in a variety of conflicts — risks dragging his administration further into the very Middle Eastern quagmires he once railed against.

Media reports on Yemen have largely focused on the disastrous raid - apparently ordered by Trump over dinner - in which a U.S. Navy Seal and a number of Yemeni civilians were killed. But U.S. involvement is expanding in other areas too: the president recently loosened the military's rules of engagement in Yemen, and has dramatically increased airstrikes against al-Qaida.

The new administration has also effectively doubled U.S. deployments to the campaign against the Islamic State group in Syria, adding 400 additional troops to the forces already deployed there. Like their counterparts in Iraq, these soldiers are tasked with providing support to local forces in northern Syria, but the mission has nonetheless resulted in the death of one marine, and the injuries of several others.

Trump is also considering escalation elsewhere: Another 2,500 paratroopers have been placed at a staging base in Kuwait to support the campaign against the Islamic State group. Meanwhile, military leaders responsible for the fight in Afghanistan have petitioned Congress and the White House for more troops, and the White House is considering loosening the rules of engagement in Afghanistan and Somalia.

Yet in each of these conflicts, additional military force is unlikely to improve the situation. In Yemen, U.S. raids and airstrikes focus on a resurgent al-Qaida and an emerging branch of the Islamic State group. Yet the two terror groups are growing primarily thanks to the Saudi-led war in Yemen, a war the Trump administration enables through air support and arms sales. Increasing military strikes treat the symptoms of Yemen's turmoil, but leave the disease untouched.

In Syria, there is no clear strategy for U.S. forces. Though the military goal — the defeat of the Islamic State group and recapture of Raqqa — is obvious, basic political problems remain unresolved. Will U.S. troops will be involved in post-conflict stabilization work? Or will local actors be able to control retaken territory? Worryingly, U.S. forces in Syria have even been forced to physically place themselves between rival Kurdish and Turkish forces to prevent them fighting.

And there appears to be little strategic rationale to the president's choices to escalate the War on Terror elsewhere. Increasing the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan may lengthen the stalemate there, but it is unlikely to bring an end to America's longest war. Even Trump's budget, which proposes military spending increases and dramatic cuts to agency budgets, ignores the need for effective foreign aid and diplomacy in combating terrorism.

During his campaign, Trump railed against the excesses of U.S. intervention in the Middle East, noting "I don't want to see the United States get bogged down. We've spent now \$2 trillion in Iraq, probably a trillion in Afghanistan. We're destroying our country." Yet in the short time since his inauguration, he has chosen instead to escalate these conflicts. If Trump doesn't want a

legacy as the president who perpetuated America's Middle East messes, he needs to change course soon.