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Obama authorizes wider war in Afghanistan

By Patrick Martin

24 November 2014

President Barack Obama has authorized the US military to carry out far more widespread air and ground operations in Afghanistan in 2015, effectively reversing his order to end combat actions this year, White House officials told the *New York Times*.

In a report published Saturday, the *Times* gave details of the new authority, citing unnamed sources in both the White House and Pentagon, in what amounts to an official leak of the expanded battle plan for the Afghanistan war.

In an announcement delivered in the White House Rose Garden in May, Obama said the US military would end combat operations in Afghanistan by December 31 and the remaining 9,800 troops would be limited to training Afghan forces and conducting strikes against “the remnants of Al Qaeda,” previously estimated to be fewer than 100 people in Afghanistan.

The new rules of engagement set by the president expand the scope of permitted military operations to include attacks on Taliban forces if they are threatening US or NATO troops and actions to assist Afghan forces in the field. In effect, US military commanders will be able to do anything they want with the forces they have available, which includes air strikes from US carriers in the Arabian Sea.

Obama's decision came as a result of intense pressure from the military brass, reinforced by the debacle suffered by the US-trained Iraqi Army during the summer, when it collapsed in the face of an offensive spearheaded by the Sunni fundamentalist group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an offshoot of Al Qaeda.

According to the *Times* account, there was a conflict between “the promise Mr. Obama made to end the war in Afghanistan, versus the demands of the Pentagon that American troops be able to successfully fulfill their remaining missions in the country.”

Civilian advisers pushed for maintaining the longstanding pledge to end US combat operations in Afghanistan. According to the *Times*, “the military pushed back, and generals both at the Pentagon and in Afghanistan urged Mr. Obama to define the mission more broadly to allow American troops to attack the Taliban.”

“There was a school of thought that wanted the mission to be very limited, focused solely on Al Qaeda,” one official told the *Times*, adding, “the military pretty much got what it wanted.”

This account, unlike many “official” leaks from the White House and Pentagon, rings true because it underscores who actually calls the shots in official Washington. Democrats and Republicans, presidents and congressmen, come and go, serving as the political front men for Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, the real decision-makers.

According to several press reports, there were additional reasons of a legal and political character for the White House reversal on Afghanistan. On December 31, Operation Enduring Freedom, the name given by the Bush administration to its invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, comes to an end.

An official declaration of the end of combat operations in Afghanistan would have severable undesirable consequences from the standpoint of Washington—not least of which being the fact that the US would be required under international law to release the remaining Taliban prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay (alleged Al Qaeda prisoners would be kept until the end of the “war on terror,” in other words, forever).

Now, Operation Enduring Freedom is to be replaced by Operation Resolute Support, and the remaining Afghan prisoners at Guantanamo, as well as those at CIA and military prisons and torture centers in Afghanistan itself, will remain incarcerated.

From a political standpoint, the US regime-change operation in Kabul, otherwise known as the 2014 Afghan presidential election, achieved its result by replacing the increasingly obstreperous and unstable Hamid Karzai with a condominium of two more dependable American stooges, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah.

Both men ran pledging, unlike Karzai, to sign a Status of Forces Agreement authorizing continued US military operations in Afghanistan after 2014, including a grant of immunity from prosecution in Afghan courts for US soldiers implicated in war crimes against the Afghan population. Ghani signed the pact immediately after taking office.

In an e-mail to the *Times*, General John F. Campbell, the US-NATO commander in Afghanistan, said of the transition from Karzai to Ghani, “The difference is night and day.” He added, “President Ghani has reached out and embraced the international community. We have a strategic opportunity we haven’t had previously with President Karzai.”

The new Afghan regime, despised by the country’s population as US stooges and beleaguered by a swelling rural insurgency, desperately needs American military protection to keep its leaders from swinging from the lampposts in the near future. In addition, Afghan officials are hungry for American cash to swell their bank accounts in Dubai and Switzerland, stashed away for the day they are forced to flee Kabul.

The result of Ghani’s capitulation and Obama’s reversal is that thousands more Afghan civilians will be slaughtered in US air strikes. The *Times* cited a “senior American military officer” reporting that “the Air Force expects to use F-16 fighters, B-1B bombers and Predator and Reaper drones” in Afghanistan next year.

Under the battle plan drawn up by the Pentagon in conjunction with NATO, US forces will operate in southern Afghanistan next year, US and Italian forces in eastern Afghanistan, German forces in northern Afghanistan, and Turkish troops in Kabul. The western part of the country is dominated by the militia of the Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, a notorious mass murderer who is now vice president, having been Ghani’s running mate in the election.

The Obama administration still publicly maintains that there will be a continued drawdown in US forces in Afghanistan, from 9,800 at the end of this year to about 1,000 by the end of 2016, whose job will be limited to protecting the US Embassy in Kabul. This promise is worth no more than Obama’s order that the US combat role end December 31, now a worthless scrap of paper.

Obama’s reversal on Afghanistan sheds additional light on the completely anti-democratic character of the US electoral system. Sometime in October, well before the November 4 vote, the White House came to two major foreign policy decisions: doubling the number of US troops in Iraq and drastically expanding the combat authorization for US troops in Afghanistan.

Popular hostility to these two wars was the principal reason for the victory of the Democrats in the 2006 congressional elections and the election of Obama in 2008. Obama ran for reelection in 2012 claiming to have ended the war in Iraq and pledging to end the war in Afghanistan by December 31, 2014. Both pledges were scrapped in the period leading up to the November 4 congressional vote, without a word being said to the American people.