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As Trump talks of bringing troops home, Washington escalates aggression from Libya to Afghanistan

President Donald Trump Tuesday reiterated comments made last week about pulling US troops out of Syria. Speaking at a White House press conference, he said, “we’ll be making a decision very quickly in coordination with others, as to what we’ll do.”

“I want to get out,” he added. “I want to bring our troops home.”

While the remarks echo similar promises made during the 2016 election campaign and are no doubt meant to shore up political support among an American population that is increasingly hostile to the unending wars in the Middle East, they fly in the face of policies enunciated by the State Department and the Pentagon, and military actions being taken on the ground in Syria and the broader region.

Having secured a record military budget of nearly \$700 billion, passed with majority support from both Democrats and Republicans, the Pentagon is sharply escalating attacks in countries stretching from Libya to Afghanistan.

In Syria itself, CNN reported this week that the US military has drafted plans to send additional troops into northern Syria to join the more than 2,000 already deployed in the country. The report described Pentagon officials as “puzzled” by Trump’s remarks.

Also on Tuesday, as Trump was making his vow to “bring our troops home,” Gen. Joseph Votel, the head of Central Command, which oversees US wars in the Middle East, stressed that the threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) “is not gone” and that the military would be remaining in Syria for “the stabilization phase.”

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“The hard part, I think, is in front of us, and that is stabilizing these areas, consolidating our gains, getting people back in their homes,” the US military commander said.

Speaking at the same event at the US Institute of Peace in Washington, Brett McGurk, US envoy for the “coalition” against ISIS, stressed that “our mission isn’t over and we are going to complete that mission.”

This “mission” was defined by ex-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson two months ago in a speech that spelled out far broader goals than defeating ISIS. Tillerson, who was fired by Trump last month, made it clear that US troops were engaged in a more or less permanent occupation of a large swathe of Syrian territory with neither the permission of the Syrian government nor a mandate from the United Nations. The purpose of this occupation is that of furthering Washington’s original aim of “regime change”; i.e., ousting the government of President Bashar al-Assad, and countering the regional influence of its principal allies, Russia and Iran.

Outside of Trump’s remarks, the only other indication of a change from this policy has been a hold placed by the White House on \$200 million in State Department funding for “stabilization projects” in Syria.

US troops on the ground continue to expand their operations, with reports from Syria of the Pentagon setting up another military base in the Al-Awn region north of the town of Manbij. The movement of US forces to the base, one of more than 20 established in northern and eastern Syria, places American forces in position for a potential direct confrontation with the forces of their ostensible NATO ally, Turkey.

Ankara has vowed to advance on Manbij in order to expel the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which functions as the Pentagon’s principal proxy ground force in the country but is regarded by the Turkish government as an extension of the Turkish Kurdish PKK, against which it has waged a counterinsurgency campaign for some three decades.

Tensions between Washington and Ankara will only be heightened by a meeting scheduled today in Turkey between the country’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian and Iranian counterparts, Vladimir Putin and Hassan Rouhani. The three powers, which all have military forces in Syria, are to discuss a joint strategy for ending the bloody seven-year-old conflict in Syria independently of Washington.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon and the military forces that it supports have carried out a series of bombings in recent days that span from North Africa to south Asia.

The bloodiest of these was carried out Monday by attack helicopters of Afghanistan’s air force, which operates under the control and direction of the US military. The warplanes

attacked a religious ceremony and graduation for Madrasa students, many of them 11 years old or younger.

Reports from the scene placed the number of dead at between 70 and 150, with many more wounded. Over 1,000 people had gathered at the ceremony in Afghanistan's northern Kunduz province.

While the US puppet government in Kabul responded to reports and photographs from the area of dead and wounded children by claiming that it had killed only Taliban fighters, the United Nations said on Tuesday that it was investigating "disturbing reports of serious harm to civilians."

Afghan officials in the area said that most of the victims were civilians. "I arrived at the scene right after the airstrikes—it was like a butcher's shop. Everywhere was covered with blood, the ground was littered with body parts, heads, limbs and other parts," Abdul Khalil told AFP at the hospital in the provincial capital of Kunduz.

The mass killing in Kunduz is part of a broader bombing campaign initiated by the US occupation forces, with the Trump administration providing new rules of engagement that allow the targeting of Taliban forces and the civilian population in areas where they are active. The United Nations report for 2017 recorded a 7 percent increase in civilian casualties over the previous year—the highest number since the UN began keeping a tally in 2009. One of the steepest increases was for victims of airstrikes, with 295 men, women and children killed and another 336 wounded.

On the same day as the Kunduz bombing, Saudi warplanes, operating with US intelligence, logistical and refueling support, attacked a civilian neighborhood in the blockaded port city of Hodeidah. Initial reports indicated 16 civilians killed, at least seven of them children.

The United Nations children's agency UNICEF issued a report Monday describing the airstrike as "one of the deadliest attacks" on children in the country since the Saudi bombing campaign began in March 2015. "Many children are reported missing as the injured and killed are still being pulled out of the rubble," the agency reported.

As reports of the carnage in Hodeidah emerged, the architect of the war, which has killed at least 13,000 Yemenis outright and threatened millions more with death from famine and disease, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was being feted in the US, lionized by the corporate media and holding meetings with Trump and an array of American billionaires, from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos to Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates and Apple chief Tim Cook.

In addition to the Afghan and the Yemeni bombings, AFRICOM, the US African command based in Djibouti carried out other significant airstrikes. It reported that on Monday it had targeted a vehicle in Somalia, killing five “al-Shabaab militants.” Reports from the country, however, said that three of the victims were civilians, including a well-known Somali poet named Yusuf Dhegey.

The puppet regime in Mogadishu defended the US airstrike with a statement declaring that poetry could be used to “incite violence.”

And on March 24, AFRICOM used a military drone to assassinate two alleged members of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, near the town of Ubari in southern Libya close to the country’s borders with Chad, Niger and Algeria. The strike represents an expansion of US operations into the region, where the Pentagon has set up a number of military bases.

In the midst of these far-ranging acts of aggression and killing, the Pentagon announced that it was sending a fleet of B-1B Lancer bombers back to the Middle East for the first time in two and a half years to carry out airstrikes throughout the region. The strategic bomber, which will be based at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, is capable of carrying some 75,000 pounds of bombs and missiles. Its deployment signals preparations for a far wider conflict in the region that may soon include war with Iran and a confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia.