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The Long War in Afghanistan Grows Longer

By Paul McLearyPaul McLeary

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American involvement in the long Afghan war was supposed to come to a close by the end of the year, but an array of top Pentagon officials spent Thursday making clear that U.S. troops will be fighting — and potentially dying — there for years to come.

The United States will “stick with Afghanistan, but not just in 2016, that’s 2017 and beyond,” Defense Secretary Ash Carter told reporters at the Pentagon Thursday afternoon, adding that the Afghan army and police remain “a force in building.” Just hours earlier, Lt. Gen. John Nicholson, President Barack Obama’s choice to be the next general to lead the war there, told a congressional panel that “in some areas we have years to go” before the Afghan army and police can stand on their own, despite the \$60 billion Washington has already spent to train and equip them.

Their comments come a year after the formal end of the U.S. and NATO combat mission in Afghanistan, though about 14,000 American and alliance troops remain on the ground to train and advise local forces. About 3,000 of those are special operations and counterterrorism forces that have been given a mandate to go after al Qaeda, and now Islamic State, fighters.

They also come amid growing evidence that the situation on the ground in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate as the Taliban have taken control of more ground than at any point since the U.S.

invasion in 2001, ISIS expands its presence there, and al Qaeda itself reestablishes training camps.

The moves are exacting a heavy human toll, with the United Nations reporting in August that about 5,000 Afghan civilians had been killed over the first half of 2015. Despite their combat mission having ended, 20 U.S. troops also died in Afghanistan over the past year.

In 2015, Afghan forces suffered a record number of casualties, with about 16,000 soldiers and police having been killed or wounded over the course of the year, up from 12,500 in 2014. The fighting has been heavy in areas previously cleared by American and British troops in Helmand and Kandahar provinces in the south, and in the eastern provinces along the Pakistan border.

The once “forgotten” war has been splashed across the front pages in recent months. In October, there was a botched U.S. airstrike in Kunduz that struck a charity hospital, killing 42 medical staff and civilian patients. More recently, there has been the release of the “Serial” podcast that takes a new look the story of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who spent five years in Taliban captivity after walking off his post in eastern Afghanistan in 2009.

The hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee began with the panel’s chairman, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), offering a harsh assessment of Obama’s management of the Afghan war and his continued practice of announcing dates for troop withdrawals. “By now, we should have learned from the precipitous withdrawal from Iraq and the disaster that ensued that wars do not end because politicians say so,” McCain charged. “Nor will any politician be able to schedule an end to the threat of radical Islamist terrorism emanating from Afghanistan or the region more broadly.”

During his own testimony, Nicholson agreed with McCain that conditions in Afghanistan grew bleaker over the past year. But he offered a depressing caveat. “This is Afghanistan,” he said. “There will always be some level of violence in Afghanistan.”

Nicholson would not tell the committee if he would recommend keeping U.S. troops in Afghanistan beyond 2017, saying he would need about 90 days after assuming command to assess the situation on the ground. Nicholson said he was alarmed by the rise of the Islamic State in Nangarhar province and of al Qaeda’s growing presence in Kandahar, describing them as “clear attempts by transnational terrorist organizations to establish sanctuary inside Afghanistan.”

Pressed by senators whether the planned drawdown of U.S. forces by the end of 2016 to about 5,500 troops would be enough to fight ISIS and al Qaeda, Nicholson declined to give a direct answer. Instead, he said the U.S. “would need to have an adequate counter-terrorism force in place” without saying how big he thought that force should be.

While Nicholson was careful to not advocate for an open-ended presence in Afghanistan, he placed the continued American presence there within the context of an “enduring” and “global” counterterrorism mission.

