



America's Invisible Wars

Emma Ashford

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With the death of a Marine sergeant in Iraq last week, the American public finally became aware that there were around 5000 US troops in that country, rather than the 3300 previously acknowledged by the Pentagon. And while most Americans probably know about ongoing U.S. military campaigns in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, they might be surprised to learn that U.S. troops are currently engaged in several other conflicts.

Thanks to sparse information, limited media coverage, and no congressional debate, America's wars are increasingly invisible. Unfortunately, not only does limited public discussion make military action easier and more appealing for policymakers, but it prevents discussion of the long-term effectiveness and costs of repeated interventions. Both Congress and the public should seek to reverse this trend.

Much of the controversy over America's ever more secretive role in the world's conflicts has focused on the post-2001 drone campaign against al-Qaeda. Yet an increasing number of conflicts today – in Somalia, Nigeria, Uganda, Syria and elsewhere - also involve small contingents of U.S. Special Operations Forces, often backed by air power.

The role played by U.S. troops in these conflicts is often ambiguous to those at home. Indeed, forces from U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) are currently embedded in 85 countries around the world, in most cases providing training, assistance or advisory services to local forces. Such assistance can be valuable, boosting the capacity of local partners to fight back against groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda.

Yet in many cases, advisors can also see combat. The Pentagon is currently drafting plans to allow U.S. troops to accompany Iraqi security forces as they attempt to retake Mosul, bringing them closer to the front lines, and effectively guaranteeing that some U.S. troops will see combat.

In other countries like Syria, U.S. Special Operations forces are actively engaged in fighting, including high-value target raids. U.S. troops are hunting Joseph Kony in Uganda, and conducting raids against Al Shabaab in Somalia. Meanwhile, the United States has conducted airstrikes and drone strikes in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and elsewhere.

As a result of these ambiguities, it can be challenging even to build up a picture of where U.S. forces are fighting; much of the relevant evidence comes from isolated news stories. And it is challenging for journalists to obtain information about troop deployments and activities: it is not uncommon for Pentagon officials to use specific talking points to suggest that the scope of an operation is more limited than it actually is.

Perhaps more worryingly, there is typically no public debate about such interventions, whether the deployment of troops, or the use of U.S. air power. In recent years, this has largely been justified by the 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) against Al Qaeda. Yet as the scope of the war on terror has expanded from Al Qaeda to ISIS, such justifications become ever more tenuous.

Nor has the 2001 AUMF been the only reason for the lack of congressional debate. In 2011, the Obama administration argued that its military intervention in Libya did not require congressional approval simply because the United States was playing a ‘limited role’ in the conflict. This explanation glosses over the substantial commitment of U.S. naval and air forces to the toppling of Libya’s government.

Unfortunately, the lack of congressional or public debate carries serious downsides. It can make military intervention easier and more appealing for policymakers, increasing their reliance on military over diplomatic approaches. Small interventions are also prone to mission creep, particularly if U.S. soldiers are put at risk.

And in bypassing public debate, we lose the ability to discuss important and necessary questions surrounding military intervention. These aren’t limited only to specific concerns – such as the costs or benefits of intervention in a specific conflict, or the trustworthiness of local partners – but to a variety of broader issues.

Some are practical questions, such as the strain of consistent deployments on America’s Special Operations Forces and their families. Others are strategic, like the question of whether frequent, limited interventions of this type actually have the potential to achieve our long-term goals. If we do not debate, or indeed, even know about these conflicts, there is no way to publicly debate such questions.

And though his rhetoric has rarely matched his actions, even President Obama has acknowledged the problem, calling in a speech at the National Defense University in 2013 for congress to appeal the 2001 AUMF, and noting that “unless we discipline our thinking, our definitions, our actions, we may be drawn into more wars we don’t need to fight.”

As recent events in Syria and Iraq illustrate, Americans are too often unaware of the wars being waged on their behalf. With little available information, it can be difficult to discuss the big issues surrounding America's consistent military interventions. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

Emma Ashford is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Cato Institute