



Can Biden end America's forever wars?

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When Joe Biden launched a strike on Syria just over a month into taking office, some cynically remarked that he was exercising a rite of passage for every American president: attacking the Middle East.

But as Biden settles into his role as president, he is entering an era in which many Americans have grown tired of indefinite wars, 9/11 no longer feels like a recent event, and the public's attention is increasingly turned towards domestic threats.

"It's not 2002 anymore. Having a carte blanche to bomb countries wherever he likes is problematic," Juan Cole, a history professor at the University of Michigan, tells *The New Arab*.

Ever since the passage of the post-9/11 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), allowing for the president "to use all necessary and appropriate force against those... he determines planned... or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harboured such organizations or persons..." there have been regular attacks in countries across the region.

These presidential powers were further strengthened with a separate AUMF in 2002, which gives the president the authority "to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq," which was later used to justify strikes against the Islamic State, including the controversial and often secretive drone strikes.

Since then, little has been done to address what is widely considered an unchecked power that violates the US constitution. According to the US Senate website, "The Constitution grants Congress the sole power to declare war. Congress has declared war on 11 occasions, including its first declaration of war with Great Britain in 1812. Congress approved its last formal declaration of war during World War II." All of America's wars in the Middle East have been authorised by other means. What Congress has approved since then has been the use of force.

As the AUMF approaches its twentieth anniversary, which will be in September, opponents are becoming more vocal. A bipartisan bill currently gaining traction aims to reverse the AUMF. Similar bills have been proposed in the past but have not been successful.

Although it likely won't have the votes to pass, the move has renewed conversations about America's so-called forever wars that have gone largely unchecked for the past 20 years. (America has been attacking countries for much longer, but the AUMF has given the executive branch unprecedented power to do so without congressional approval.)

"I think it's a signal something is changing," Richard Hanania, a research fellow at the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University, told *The New Arab*. "Biden wants a signal."

Although he doesn't expect the bill to pass, he does see it as a sign of a growing public discontent – and potentially public pressure – over America's forever wars.

"Presidents have inherent legal authority to repel imminent attacks and political cover for doing so. The main function the AUMFs have served is providing cover for an array of policies that aren't necessary for US national security," Justin Logan, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute told *The New Arab*.

This comes in the context of the United States revisiting a range of post-9/11 policies that are increasingly seen as outdated or undemocratic. New policies were initiated at all domestic and international levels of law enforcement, government and intelligence.

"Terrorism is a limited national security problem that should be dealt with without war. As we approach the 20th anniversary of 9/11, it's past time for a major shift in both policy and law," said Logan. Any change in policy would of course require careful planning, given America's long-entrenched involvement in conflicts in the region.

In one potential sign of more military oversight, it was announced on Monday that Biden has suspended drone strikes outside of war zones where US forces are operating, according to Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby.

Any drone strikes planned against jihadist groups outside of Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq will have to be approved by the White House, reversing Donald Trump's military policy. "It's not meant to be permanent and it doesn't mean a cessation" of strikes, Kirby told a news conference.

When the US launched its war in Afghanistan just one month after the 9/11 attacks, it would be entering into the longest sustained conflict in its history. The military campaign initially had the American public's support, which gradually lessened as it dragged on, far outlasting what was originally expected. Today, America is in the position of wanting to leave Afghanistan, but with no feasible exit plan.

"Any president who got out of Afghanistan and then saw Kabul to fall to the Taliban would have trouble in the next election. No one wants that," said Cole, referring to Biden's difficult path to leaving Afghanistan.

"Part of the problem with these forever wars is that no one wants to be Gerald Ford. It wasn't his fault that south Vietnam fell to the north. Saigon itself fell. It made a very bad impression of Ford that he wasn't in control. Nobody wants to be Ford and have the Americans evacuated with Kabul falling."

For America's military presence in Iraq, which followed that of Afghanistan, Cole sees the planned NATO expansion to 4,000 troops as a viable option for now.

"The US now has a feud with Shiite militias. The rest of NATO doesn't have those feuds. If Iraq needs more troops, let it be NATO," he says. As for ending the AUMF, he says he doesn't expect the bill to pass, as it would require a 60-vote majority.

"It would be good if it passed, but it wouldn't pass. Republicans would block it. When they get the White House back, they want to have it available."