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A Pentagon official predicted Thursday the war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates could last up to 20 more years. The comment came during a Senate hearing revisiting the Authorization for Use of Military Force, or AUMF, enacted by Congress days after the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. At the hearing, Pentagon officials claimed the AUMF gives the president power to wage endless war anywhere in the world, including in Syria, Yemen and the Congo. "This is the most astounding and most astoundingly disturbing hearing that I've been to since I've been here," said Independent Sen. Angus King of Maine. "You guys have essentially rewritten the Constitution here today." We play excerpts of Thursday's Senate hearing and our recent interview with Jeremy Scahill, author of the new bestseller, "Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield."

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: A Pentagon official predicted Thursday the war against al-Qaeda and its affiliates could last up to 20 more years. The comment came during a Senate hearing revisiting the Authorization for Use of Military Force, or AUMF, enacted by Congress days after the attacks. At the hearing, Pentagon officials claimed the AUMF gives the president power to wage endless war anywhere on the globe. Senator Angus King, an independent from Maine, described the hearing as the most, quote, "astoundingly disturbing" one he had been to since taking office earlier this year. King accused Obama administration of rewriting the Constitution.

AMY GOODMAN: We begin's today's show with highlights from the hearing. In a moment we'll hear Senator Angus King in his own words, but first, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham questioning two Pentagon officials, Michael Sheehan, the assistant secretary of defense in charge of special operations, and Robert Taylor, acting general counsel, Department of Defense. This is Senator Graham.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: Do you agree with me, the war against radical Islam, or terror, whatever description you like to provide, will go on after the second term of President Obama?

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Senator, in my judgment, this is going to go on for quite a while, and, yes, beyond the second term of the president.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: And beyond this term of Congress?

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Yes, sir. I think it's at least 10 to 20 years.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: So, from your point of view, you have all of the authorization and legal authorities necessary to conduct a drone strike against terrorist organizations in Yemen without changing the AUMF.

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Yes, sir, I do believe that.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: You agree with that, General?

BRIG. GEN. RICHARD GROSS: I do, sir.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: General, do you agree with that?

GEN. MICHAEL NAGATA: I do, sir.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: OK. Could we send military members into Yemen to strike against one of these organizations? Does the president have that authority to put boots on the ground in Yemen?

ROBERT TAYLOR: As I mentioned before, there's domestic authority and international law authority. At the moment, the basis for putting boots on the ground in Yemen, we respect the sovereignty of Yemen, and it would—

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about: Does he have the legal authority under our law to do that?

ROBERT TAYLOR: Under domestic authority, he would have that authority.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: I hope that Congress is OK with that. I'm OK with that. Does he have authority to put boots on the ground in the Congo?

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Yes, sir, he does.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: OK. Do you agree with me that when it comes to international terrorism, we're talking about a worldwide struggle?

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Absolutely, sir. [inaudible]

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: Would you agree with me the battlefield is wherever the enemy chooses to make it?

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Yes, sir, from Boston to the FATA.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: I couldn't agree with you more. We're in a—do you agree with that, General?

BRIG. GEN. RICHARD GROSS: Yes, sir. I agree that the enemy decides where the battlefield is.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: And it could be anyplace on the planet, and we have to be aware and able to act. And do you have the ability to act, and are you aware of the threats?

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Yes, sir. We do have the ability to react, and we are tracking threats globally.

SEN. LINDSEY GRAHAM: From my point of view, I think your analysis is correct, and I appreciate all of your service to our country.

SEN. CARL LEVIN: Senator King.

SEN. ANGUS KING: Gentlemen, I've only been here five months, but this is the most astounding and most astoundingly disturbing hearing that I've been to since I've been here. You guys have essentially rewritten the Constitution here today. The Constitution, Article I, Section 8, Clause 11, clearly says that the Congress has the power to declare war. This—this authorization, the AUMF, is very limited. And you keep using the term "associated forces." You use it 13 times in your statement. That is not in the AUMF.

. And you said at one point, "It suits us very well." I assume it does suit you very well, because you're reading it to cover everything and anything. And then you said, at another point, "So, even if the AUMF doesn't apply, the general law of war applies, and we can take these actions." So, my question is: How do you possibly square this with the requirement of the Constitution that the Congress has the power to declare war?

This is one of the most fundamental divisions in our constitutional scheme, that the Congress has the power to declare war; the president is the commander-in-chief and prosecutes the war. But you're reading this AUMF in such a way as to apply clearly outside of what it says. Senator McCain was absolutely right: It refers to the people who planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks on September 11. That's a date. That's a date. It doesn't go into the future. And then it says, "or harbored such organizations"—past tense—"or persons in order to prevent any future acts by such nations, organizations or persons." It established a date.

I don't disagree that we need to fight terrorism. But we need to do it in a constitutionally sound way. Now, I'm just a little, old lawyer from Brunswick, Maine, but I don't see how you can possibly read this to be in comport with the Constitution and authorize any acts by the president. You had testified to Senator Graham that you believe that you could put boots on the ground in Yemen now under this—under this document. That makes the war powers a nullity. I'm sorry to ask such a long question, but my question is: What's your response to this? Anybody?

MICHAEL SHEEHAN: Senator, let me take the first response. I'm not a constitutional lawyer or a lawyer of any kind. But let me talk to you a little—take a brief statement about al-Qaeda and the organization that attacked us on September 11, 2001. In the two years prior to that,

Senator King, that organization attacked us in East Africa and killed 17 Americans in our embassy in Nairobi, with loosely affiliated groups of people in East Africa. A year prior to 9/11, that same organization, with its affiliates in Yemen, almost sunk a U.S. ship, the U.S.S. Cole, a billion-dollar warship, killed 17 sailors in the port of Aden. The organization that attacked us on 9/11 already had its tentacles in—around the world with associated groups. That was the nature of the organization then; it is the nature of the organization now. In order to attack that organization, we have to attack it with those affiliates that are its operational arm that have previously attacked and killed Americans, and at high-level interests, and continue to try to do that.

SEN. ANGUS KING: That's fine, but that's not what the AUMF says. You can—you can—what I'm saying is, we may need new authority, but don't—if you expand this to the extent that you have, it's meaningless, and the limitation in the war power is meaningless. I'm not disagreeing that we need to attack terrorism wherever it comes from and whoever is doing it. But what I'm saying is, let's do it in a constitutional way, not by putting a gloss on a document that clearly won't support it. It just—it just doesn't—it just doesn't work. I'm just reading the words. It's all focused on September 11 and who was involved, and you guys have invented this term "associated forces" that's nowhere in this document. As I mentioned, in your written statement, you use that—that's the key term. You use it 13 times. It's the justification for everything. And it renders the war powers of the Congress null and void. I don't understand. I mean, I do understand you're saying we don't need any change, because the way you read it, you can—you could do anything. But why not say—come back to us and say, "Yes, you're correct that this is an overbroad reading that renders the war powers of the Congress a nullity; therefore, we need new authorization to respond to the new situation"? I don't understand why—I mean, I do understand it, because the way you read it, there's no limit. But that's not what the Constitution contemplates.

AMY GOODMAN: Independent Senator Angus King of Maine, speaking Thursday at a Senate hearing on the president's war powers under the Authorization for Use of Military Force.

Well, journalist [Jeremy Scahill](#) discussed the same topic when he appeared on *Democracy Now!* last month. Jeremy is the author of the new bestseller, *Dirty Wars: The World Is a Battlefield*.

JEREMY SCAHILL: The concept of *The World Is a Battlefield* actually is not something I thought up; it's a doctrine, actually, a military doctrine called "Operational Preparation of the Battlespace," which views the world as a battlefield. And what it says is that if there are countries where you predict, where the military predicts that conflicts are likely or that war is a possibility, you can forward deploy troops to those countries to prepare the battlefield. And under both Bush and Obama, the world has been declared the battlefield. You know, the Authorization for the Use of Military Force that was passed after 9/11 is technically the law that President Obama and his administration point to when they say they have a right to drone strike in Yemen, because these people are connected to the 9/11 attacks. But in reality, one of the enduring legacies of the Obama presidency is going to be that he solidified this Cheneyesque view of the U.S. government, which says that when it comes to foreign policy, that the executive branch is effectively a dictatorship and that Congress only has a minimal role to play in oversight. I mean, Cheney didn't want Congress to have any role in it. Obama's administration plays this game with Congress: Certain people can go into the padded room and look at this one document, but, oh, not this other document, and you're not allowed to bring in a utensil to write with, and you can't ever tell anyone what you said. That's congressional oversight on our assassination program. But they have doubled down on this all-powerful executive branch perspective. And that's why we see this stuff expanding.