



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 1, 2017

Pentagon Admits Underreporting Troops in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria

Think the United States has 8,400 troops in Afghanistan? Think again. The actual headcount is closer to 11,000, the Defense Department admitted Wednesday, saying it had been deliberately underreporting the number of troops deployed overseas for years.

“We’re saying the number’s 11,000 today, and we’ll go up or down slightly based on the operational requirement,” [said](#) Marine Lieutenant General Frank McKenzie, director of the Pentagon’s Joint Staff. “That’s the total forces that are in Afghanistan today. Should that number change, significantly, then we will come back in here to tell you,” he added.



The official troop count in Afghanistan has for years been about 8,400, the maximum permitted by troop caps instituted under President Barack Obama. According to [Politico](#), these caps “led to an elaborate Pentagon accounting system” to keep troop counts down:

Under the so-called Force Management Level policy, the Pentagon doesn’t count troops who are in the war zones for fewer than 120 days in the public numbers. That includes troops like construction engineers who are building a bridge or repairing an airfield, as well as the combat units like Marine artillery batteries that have deployed to Syria — even though those very Marines have been featured in glitzy official videos.

Still, it was an open secret that the troop levels were much higher than the official numbers, not just in Afghanistan but also in Iraq and Syria:

In Iraq, where the Baghdad government faces political resistance to a large American troop presence, the 5,200 troop figure the Pentagon uses in public serves as a useful fiction. In fact, more than 7,000 U.S. troops are in Iraq, according to recent reports.

And in Syria the official 503 U.S. troops mostly covers special operations units. But hundreds of other troops who support them and their local allies remain classified — including the Marine artillerymen and Army Rangers whose vehicles are frequently photographed by local journalists.

The new policy of announcing actual — or at least reasonable approximations of — troop counts is part of Defense Secretary James Mattis’ push for greater transparency in his department, Mattis spokeswoman Dana White told reporters. “This way of doing business is over,” she said, referring to the practice of lowballing official troop counts.

McKenzie said “the same principles will apply” to the troop counts in Iraq and Syria, adding that “those numbers will be out soon.”



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He also said the new policy would apply to any increase in the number of troops in Afghanistan, which is likely to occur soon. President Donald Trump has authorized the deployment of an additional 3,900 troops, though McKenzie said none has been deployed yet. “No troops have started to flow. No deployment orders have been issued,” he stated.

In a [statement](#), House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-Texas) praised the new policy: “I am pleased to see that as we prepare to execute a new strategy in Afghanistan, President Trump and Secretary Mattis have chosen to put the facts on the table. The Obama Administration did not shoot straight on how many people they sent to Afghanistan, which added cost to the mission and made it harder to succeed. It is important to be upfront about the importance of the mission and what it takes to succeed.”

But just how committed to transparency is Trump? In his address to the nation announcing the troop increase last week, the President [declared](#), “We will not talk about numbers of troops or our plans for further military activities,” suggesting that secrecy, not openness, would continue to be the order of the day.

For now, though, Mattis deserves at least one cheer for trying to be honest with the people who pay his salary. Let no one feign shock, however, if this new transparency turns out to be as opaque as that of [“the most transparent administration in history.”](#)

Image: Screenshot of [Facebook page of U.S. troops in Afghanistan](#)



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