

Civil rights group calls the transparency clampdown “deeply disturbing”

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"I don't want to talk specific numbers...basically, I don't give the enemy information they could use to their advantage." He added: "And I'm told by

some, ‘Well, people used to do that.’ That’s not me.”

When asked by the Bureau whether General Mattis’s comments about not providing information to the enemy amounted to a formal instruction, the Office for the Secretary of Defense simply said the November remarks “stand as guidance” for commanders.

It is not clear whether the change in practice was as a result of Mattis’s remarks, or whether they simply represent a more public expression of a new culture at the Pentagon. Nor is it clear that the new practice amounts to a formal policy.

Captain Thomas Gresback, a Resolute Support spokesperson in Afghanistan, told the Bureau that their decision to restrict the flow of information was “made locally...based on the circumstances in the area of operation.”

On the other hand the US military command in Africa, Africom, has said it will continue to release detailed information on strikes in Somalia, in the interests of transparency. Detailed information is also still being released about strikes in Iraq and Syria.

The restriction of information makes it harder for the Bureau to gain a proper picture of the war in Afghanistan and Yemen and hold operations in those countries to account as they increase in intensity.

A US military official derided the idea that the level of detail once provided would give the enemy an advantage.

“The enemy knows a strike happened. It’s ridiculous”, the official told the Bureau, adding: “the policy for US forces is that you can confirm what happened yesterday – that’s how we’ve been trained”.

Hina Shamsi, director of the National Security Project at the American Civil Liberties Union, called the new practice “deeply disturbing.”

“It hides the costs and consequences of US lethal force from the public in whose name the military conducts operations”, said Shamsi.

“At the same time, civilians who are wrongly or mistakenly harmed say that it is the absence of transparency and accountability that weighs most heavily on them.”

The amount of information made available by the Pentagon about its overseas operations has fluctuated over the years, and it could be that the practices in place since late last year are just a one swing of the pendulum.

But they resonate with a wider picture of decreasing military transparency under the Trump administration.

On 1 March 2018, the Air Force ordered an overhaul of its public affairs operations aimed at preventing the release of information deemed sensitive.

The March guidance, which was obtained by Defense News, said:

“In line with the new National Defense Strategy, the Air Force must hone its culture of engagement to include a heightened focus on practicing sound operational security. As we engage the public, we must avoid giving insights to our adversaries that could erode our military advantage.”

Military watchdog SIGAR meanwhile [reported in October](#) last year that the US had begun to withhold data on the size and attrition (also known as churn) rate of the Afghan security forces. In January 2018, SIGAR reported that the release of other key metrics of the war in Afghanistan once available had also been restricted, including the number of districts under Taliban control. The US later said this had been a [human error in labelling](#) and released some of the data.

The clampdown comes as the use of US air power has increased – the Bureau’s data shows that strikes doubled in Afghanistan and tripled in Yemen last year compared to the previous one.

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