American Drones Over Africa: New US Military Bases in West Africa

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This week the New York Times reported that the US is planning to establish a new base for its drones in north-west Africa. While the base is to be used initially to fly unarmed surveillance drones, according to the article the US does not rule out the possibility of using the base to launch drone strikes in the future. One day after the NYT piece, Reuters reported the base would be established in Niger. According to "a senior government source" says Reuters, "the U.S. ambassador to Niger, Bisa Williams, made the request at a meeting on Monday with President Mahamadou Issoufou, who immediately accepted it."

Mali will no-doubt be one of the initial targets of the US drones, bordering as it does on Niger. The deployment of French surveillance drones in Mali was reported last October and there has been speculation that British drones could be deployed as part of Britain's military support to French forces in Mali, however the British Defence Minister, Philip Hammond said recently that he had decided against sending drones as they are needed in Afghanistan.

While drones have mainly been used in South Asia, unmanned drone have flown in African skies for many years.

According to David Axe's must read article, America's Secret Drone War in Africa , the first known US attack in African involving a drone took place on 7th Jan 2007 when a US Predator drone tracked a convoy near the southern Somali town of Ras Kamboni and guided in an attack by a US gunship. Since that first attack, US drones have operated more or less continuously over African soil.

Despite President George Bush telling reporters in 2008 "I want to dispel the notion that all of a sudden America is, you know, bringing all kinds of military to Africa. It's just simply not true," many US bases have been established including bases for unmanned drones.   The most well-known base from where drones operate in Africa is in Djibouti, but there are also

bases in Ethiopia and the Seychelles.   Asked about the presence of US drones at press event in the Seychelles in 2009 US diplomat Craig White said:

> "The government of Seychelles invited us here to fight against piracy, and that is its mission…. however, these aircraft have a great deal of capabilities and could be used for other missions."

In addition to theses bases, informed analysts say that a base in the DRC is being expanded and could be used to host drones. Other US military bases have also been established in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Uganda and there are plans to open a base in South Sudan to carry out intelligence gathering and surveillance flights using other aircraft.

Somalia continues to be one of the main focuses of US drone operations in Africa (see Bureau of Investigative Journalism – US Covert War in Somalia). Although most of the US military activity in Somalia is covert, occasionally US officials confirm the use of armed drones.   According to Chris Woods of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) there have been around 23 US airstrikes in Somalia since 2007, many of which have involved US drones.

In July 2012, UN officials released a report complaining that the presence of unmanned drones in Somalia posed a danger to air-traffic and risked violating the long-standing arms embargo on the country. The report detailed three specific events – a drone crash into a refugee camp, the flight of a drone dangerously close to a fuel dump, and the near collision of a drone with a large passenger plane over Mogadishu – calling them near disasters.

Last year, a British citizen was killed in a US drone strike in Somalia. Bilal el-Berjawi was travelling in a car just outside Mogadishu when a US drone launched three missiles, killing him and almost certainly others travelling in the car. According to the Guardian, el-Berjawi may have given his location away when he talked on the phone to his wife who had just given birth a few hours before. It should perhaps be noted that the UK does not count el-Berjawi as a British citizen as it unilaterally stripped him of citizenship in 2011.

In June 2012 a "mystery air-strike" on a convoy of trucks in Northern Mali was reported. The original report from the Magharebia website (which it should be noted is sponsored by United States Africa Command) stated that seven "terrorists" of a brigade linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) were killed while several others were injured. US intelligence officials contacted by the Long War Journal would neither confirm nor deny US involvement in the strike.

In Libya too, there have been persistent reports from Libyan officials that US drones continue to fly there since the official end of the armed conflict in October 2011. US officials initially refused to comment but later acknowledged their presence for "surveillance purposes".   There have been disputed reports about whether a US drone was in the area during the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi in September 2011.

Like the drone wars in South Asia, much of what happening in regard to the use of drones in Africa is shrouded in secrecy. With the establishment of this new drone base in Niger, drones will no doubt continue to fly in African skies for the foreseeable future but as always, details will remain hidden from view.

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