In Mali and the Rest of Africa, the U.S. Military Fights a Hidden War

By Nick Turse

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Theme: US NATO War Agenda

The General leading the U.S. military's hidden war in Africa says the continent is now home to nearly 50 terrorist organizations and "illicit groups" that threaten U.S. interests. And today, gunmen reportedly yelling "Allahu Akbar" stormed the Radisson Blu hotel in Mali's capital and seized several dozen hostages. U.S. special operations forces are "currently assisting hostage recovery efforts," a Pentagon spokesperson said, and U.S. personnel have "helped move civilians to secured locations, as Malian forces clear the hotel of hostile gunmen."

In Mali, groups like Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa have long posed a threat. Major terrorist groups in Africa include al Shabaab, Boko Haram and al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM). In the wake of the Paris attacks by ISIS, attention has been drawn to ISIS affiliates in Egypt and Libya, too. But what are the dozens of other groups in Africa that the Pentagon is fighting with more special operations forces, more outposts, and more missions than ever?

For the most part, the Pentagon won't say.

Republic of Mali and United States Special Operations Forces troops stand in formation next to each other during the opening ceremony of the Flintlock 10 Exercise held May 3, 2010 in Bamako, Mali.

Brigadier General Donald Bolduc, chief of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa, made a little-noticed comment earlier this month about these terror groups. After describing ISIS as a transnational and transregional threat, he went on to tell the audience of the Defense One Summit, "Although ISIS is a concern, so is al Shabaab, so is the Lord's Resistance Army in Central Africa and the 43 other illicit groups that operate in the area ... Boko Haram, AQIM, and other small groups in that area."

Bolduc mentioned only a handful of terror groups by name, so I asked for clarification from the Department of Defense, Africa Command (AFRICOM), and Special Operations Command Africa (SOCAFRICA). None offered any names, let alone a complete accounting. SOCAFRICA did not respond to multiple queries by *The Intercept*. AFRICOM spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Anthony Falvo would only state, "I have nothing further for you."

While the State Department maintains a list of foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs), including 10 operating in Africa (ISIS, Boko Haram, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, al Shabaab, AQIM,

Ansaru, Ansar al-Din, Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia, as well as Libya's Ansar al-Shari'a in Benghazi and Ansar al-Shari'a in Darnah), it "does not provide the DoD any legal or policy approval," according to Lt. Col. Michelle Baldanza, a Defense Department spokesperson.

"The DoD does not maintain a separate or similar list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations for the government," she said in an email to *The Intercept*. "In general, not all groups of armed individuals on the African continent that potentially present a threat to U.S. interests would be subject to FTO. DoD works closely with the Intel Community, Inter-Agency, and the [National Security Council] to continuously monitor threats to U.S. interests; and when required, identifies, tracks, and presents options to mitigate threats to U.S. persons overseas."

This isn't the first time the Defense Department has been unable or unwilling to name the groups it's fighting. In 2013, *The Intercept*'s Cora Currier, then writing for ProPublica, asked for a full list of America's war-on-terror enemies and was [told](#) by a Pentagon spokesman that public disclosure of the names could increase the prestige and recruitment prowess of the groups and do "serious damage to national security." Jack Goldsmith, a professor at Harvard Law School who served as a legal counsel during the George W. Bush administration, told Currier that the Pentagon's rationale was weak and there was a "very important interest in the public knowing who the government is fighting against in its name."

The secret of whom the U.S. military is fighting extends to Africa. Since 9/11, U.S. military efforts on the continent have grown in every conceivable way, from funding and manpower to missions and outposts, while at the same time the number of transnational terror groups has increased in linear fashion, according to the military. The reasons for this are murky. Is it a spillover from events in the Middle East and Central Asia? Are U.S. operations helping to spawn and spread terror groups? Is the Pentagon inflating the terror threat for its own gain? Is the rise of these terrorist organizations due to myriad local factors? Or more likely, is it a combination of these and other reasons? The task of answering these questions is made more difficult when no one in the military is willing to name more than a handful of the transnational terror groups that are classified as America's enemies.

> Before 9/11, Africa seemed to be free of transnational terror threats, according to the U.S. government.

In 2000, for example, a report prepared under the auspices of the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute examined the "African security environment." While noting the existence of "internal separatist or rebel movements" in "weak states," as well as militias and "warlord armies," it made no mention of Islamic extremism or major transnational terror threats.

In early 2002, a senior Pentagon official speaking on background [told](#)reporters that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan might drive "terrorists" out of that nation and into Africa. "Terrorists associated with al Qaeda and indigenous terrorist groups have been and continue to be present in this region," he said. "These terrorists will, of course, threaten U.S. personnel and facilities."

Pressed about genuine transnational threats, the official drew attention to Somali militants, specifically several hundred members of al Itihaad al Islamiya—a [forerunner](#) of al Shabaab

— but admitted that even the most extreme members "really have not engaged in acts of terrorism outside Somalia." Questioned about ties between Osama bin Laden's core al Qaeda group and African militants, the official offered tenuous links, like bin Laden's "salute" to Somali fighters who killed U.S. troops during the infamous 1993 Black Hawk Down incident.

The U.S. nonetheless deployed military personnel to Africa in 2002, while the State Department launched a big-budget counterterrorism program, known as the Pan Sahel Initiative, to enhance the capabilities of the militaries of Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. In 2005, that program expanded to include Algeria, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia and was renamed the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership.

In the years that followed, the U.S. increased its efforts. In 2014, for example, the U.S. carried out 674 military missions across the continent — an average of nearly two per day and an increase of about 300 percent since U.S. Africa Command was launched in 2008. The U.S. also took part in a number of multinational military interventions, including a [coalition](#) [war](#) in Libya, assistance to French and African forces fighting militants in Central African Republic and Mali, and the training and funding of African proxies to do battle against extremist groups like al Shabaab and Boko Haram.

The U.S. has also carried out a shadow war of [special ops raids](#), [drone strikes](#) and [other](#) [attacks](#), as well as an expanding number of [training missions](#) by elite forces. U.S. special operations teams are now deployed to 23 African countries "seven days a week, 24/7," according to Bolduc. "The most effective thing that we do is about 1,400 SOF operators and supporters integrated with our partner nation, integrated with our allies and other coalition partners in a way that allows us to take advantage of each other's capabilities," he said.

The U.S. military has also set up a [network of bases](#) — although it is loath to refer to them in such terms. A recent report by *The Intercept*, relying on classified documents leaked by a whistleblower, detailed an [archipelago of outposts](#) integral to a secret drone assassination program that was based at the premier U.S. facility on the African continent, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. That base alone has [expanded](#) since 2002 from 88 acres to nearly 600 acres, with more than $600 million allocated or awarded for projects and $1.2 billion in construction and improvements [planned](#) for the future.

A continent relatively free of transnational terror threats in 2001 is — after almost 14 years of U.S. military efforts — now rife with them, in the Pentagon's view. Bolduc said the African continent is "as lethal and dangerous an environment as anywhere else in the world," and specifically invoked ISIS, which he called "a transnational threat, a transregional threat, as are all threats that we deal with in Africa." But the Pentagon would not specify whether the threat levels are stable, increasing, or decreasing. "I can't get into any details regarding threats or future operations," Lt. Col. Baldanza stated. "I can say that we will continue to work with our African partners to enable them in their counter-terrorism efforts as they further grow security and stability in the region."

In the end, Bolduc tempered expectations that his troops might be able to transform the region in any significant way. "The military can only get you so far," he told the Defense One Summit audience. "So if I'm asked to build a counter-violent extremist organization capability in a particular country, I can do that ... but if there's not ... a valid institution to plug it into, then we are there for a long time."

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