

Africa: Continent Where US Military Wages Shadow Wars

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Global Research, October 30, 2017

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#) 28 October 2017

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Militarization and WMD](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

The details about US military presence in Africa happened to be a surprise even for members of the Congress. On October 4, four American soldiers [were killed](#) by militants linked to the Islamic State in Niger. The incident thrust the issue of US military presence in Africa into the spotlight and drew the [attention of senators](#) tasked with military oversight. It has been revealed that even the Congress has been kept in the dark about the US involvement in that country. It puts into question the accountability of the military. Since it was established as an independent command in 2006, the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) has never been transparent with its activities largely shrouded in secrecy.

In the aftermath of the incident, the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, **General Joseph Dunford**, revealed at a [press-conference](#) that about 800 US troops are now based in Niger – more than in any other African country. The press conference came after several US senators [expressed surprise](#) that the US had such a large military presence on the continent, and Niger in particular.

“I didn’t know there was 1,000 troops in Niger,” **Senator Lindsey Graham** [said](#) on NBC’s “Meet the Press.” “This is an endless war without boundaries and no limitation on time and geography ... You’ve got to tell us more.”

Indeed, the size of the presence was a big surprise for lawmakers as well as public in general. The vast majority of Americans probably had no idea that the US even had military troops participating in combat missions in Africa before the incident in Niger. The US has previously acknowledged it has troops there. But it’s never gone into much detail. Niger has also allowed the United States to build a large drone base at an estimated cost of \$100 million near the central trading city of Agadez. Dunford acknowledged the lack of communication between military leaders and the Congress, and said he and **Secretary of Defense James Mattis** would “double” their efforts to communicate better with senators.

American forces entered the region en masse in the early 2000s, when the United States began training and equipping militaries in dozens of African countries. According to Dunford, a total of 6,000 US troops are deployed in 53 African countries today. They are conducting [3,500](#) exercises, programs, and engagements each year – almost 10 missions each day. The number of the Special Operations Forces (SOF) across the continent rose from 450 in 2012 to 1,300 in 2017 (of 8,000 SOF deployed globally this year). The United Nations recognizes 54 countries in Africa. It means that only one of them is free of US military

presence!

Officially, the United States only has one military base in Africa — Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. But SOF outfits, including the Green Berets, the Navy SEALs and Marine and Air Force commandos, also use an air base at Moron in southern Spain for Africa operations. Other operating sites are called “forward operating sites”, “cooperative security locations” (CSL) or “contingency locations” in host countries.

According to the AFRICOM 2017 Posture statement, the command runs a network of 46 sites, including two forward operating sites (Djibouti’s Camp Lemonnier and a base on the United Kingdom’s Ascension Island off the west coast of Africa), 13 cooperative security locations, and 31 “non-enduring” contingency locations. This is an increase by 10 locations—a 28 percent jump—in just over two years.

African bases have long been essential, for instance, to Washington’s ongoing shadow war in [Yemen](#), which has seen a [significant increase](#) in drone strikes under the Trump administration. Djibouti is essential for operations in the Arabian Peninsula. CSL Entebbe in Uganda is a hub for [surveillance aircraft](#), carrying out mission across the continent. The US sprawling, ever-expanding network of bases provides the crucial infrastructure for cross-continental combat by US and allied forces, especially France, which boasts a large military presence (5,000 troops) of its own.

Many activities the Pentagon has described as “advise and assist” in nature [seem to be indistinguishable from combat](#) by any basic definition. Claiming troops are only “assisting” or “training” local forces is the way that the US military establishes a foothold in African countries.

Private military contractors have become another element of US presence on the continent.

The Trump administration [is preparing](#) to dismantle key Obama-era limits on drone strikes and commando raids outside conventional battlefields. This will lead to drastic escalation in the use of forces in Africa. Somalia has already been declared an “area of active hostilities,” temporarily bringing it under less restrictive war-zone rule.

The military operations in Africa have never been specifically authorized by Congress, let alone discussed and debated by the American public. The [Authorization for Use of Force](#), adopted right after the Sept. 11, 2001, says the president is authorized to use force against the planners of the attacks and those who harbor them. It does not cover mere supporters of such groups and associated forces. Nevertheless, the legislation has been used for 16 years now to justify conflicts in many countries, including Afghanistan, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Georgia, Iraq, Kenya, the Philippines, Somalia and Yemen.

The 1973 War Powers Resolution is a federal law in force intended to check the president’s power to commit the United States to an armed conflict without the consent of the US Congress. It provides that under certain circumstances a President can deploy troops into combat situations, but there are periodic reporting requirements for a President as well as time limits on how long troops can remain engaged in conflicts without a formal declaration of war or specific congressional authorization. The law was breached when the US bombed Yugoslavia in 1999. It is also not observed in Africa because formally the US is not at war there, despite the fact that it is waging combat operations where servicemen lose their lives. The October 4 tragedy in Niger is just another example. In May, a Marine was killed in

Somalia.

The military presence in Africa will probably grow in the future. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, indicated that the United States may increase its military presence.

“The war is morphing. We’re going to see more actions in Africa, not less,” he [said](#).

The policy marks a stark about-face from Trump’s campaign declarations that the US can no longer afford to be the world’s policeman. The military operations in Africa suggest otherwise. The fighting in Africa seldom hits media headlines but it does not change the fact that the US is waging a war. Niger is the perfect illustration of America’s permanent war posture around the world, where combat operations are conducted with little or no public scrutiny and no congressional authorization. The administration appears to view the international problems mostly through a military prism.

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