

The Terror Diaspora: The U.S. Military and Obama's Scramble for Africa

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The Gulf of Guinea. He said it without a hint of irony or embarrassment. This was one of U.S. Africa Command's big success stories. The Gulf... of Guinea.

Never mind that [most](#) Americans couldn't [find](#) it on a [map](#) and haven't heard of the nations on its shores like Gabon, Benin, and Togo. Never mind that just five days before I talked with AFRICOM's chief spokesman, the Economist had asked if the Gulf of Guinea was on the verge of becoming "[another Somalia](#)," because piracy there had jumped 41% from 2011 to 2012 and was on track to be even worse in 2013.

The Gulf of Guinea was one of the primary areas in Africa where "stability," the command spokesman assured me, had "improved significantly," and the U.S. military had played a major role in bringing it about. But what did that say about so many other areas of the continent that, since AFRICOM was set up, had been wracked by coups, insurgencies, violence, and volatility?

A careful examination of the security situation in Africa suggests that it is in the process of becoming Ground Zero for a veritable terror diaspora set in motion in the wake of 9/11 that has only accelerated in the Obama years. Recent history indicates that as U.S. "stability" operations in Africa have increased, militancy has spread, insurgent groups have proliferated, allies have faltered or committed abuses, terrorism has increased, the number of failed states has risen, and the continent has become more unsettled.

The signal event in this tsunami of blowback was the U.S. participation in a war to fell Libyan autocrat Muammar Qaddafi that helped send neighboring Mali, a U.S.-supported bulwark against regional terrorism, into a downward spiral, prompting the intervention of the French military with U.S. backing. The situation could still worsen as the U.S. armed forces grow ever more involved. They are already expanding air operations across the continent, engaging in spy missions for the French military, and utilizing other previously undisclosed sites in Africa.

The Terror Diaspora

In 2000, a report prepared under the auspices of the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute [examined](#) the "African security environment." While it touched on "internal separatist or rebel movements" in "weak states," as well as non-state actors like militias and "warlord armies," it made no mention of Islamic extremism or major transnational terrorist threats. In fact, prior to 2001, the United States did not [recognize](#) any terrorist organizations in sub-Saharan Africa.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, a senior Pentagon official [claimed](#) that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan might drive “terrorists” out of that country and into African nations. “Terrorists associated with al Qaeda and indigenous terrorist groups have been and continue to be a presence in this region,” he said. “These terrorists will, of course, threaten U.S. personnel and facilities.”

When [pressed](#) about actual transnational dangers, the official pointed to Somali militants but eventually admitted that even the most extreme Islamists there “really have not engaged in acts of terrorism outside Somalia.” Similarly, when questioned about connections between Osama bin Laden’s core al-Qaeda group and African extremists, he offered only the most tenuous links, like bin Laden’s “salute” to Somali militants who killed U.S. troops during the infamous 1993 “Black Hawk Down” incident.

Despite this, the U.S. [dispatched](#) personnel to Africa as part of Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) in 2002. The next year, CJTF-HOA took up residence at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, where it resides to this day on the only officially avowed U.S. base in Africa.

As CJTF-HOA was starting up, the State Department [launched](#) a multi-million-dollar counterterrorism program, known as the Pan-Sahel Initiative, to bolster the militaries of Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania. In 2004, for example, Special Forces training teams were [sent](#) to Mali as part of the effort. In 2005, the program [expanded](#) to include Nigeria, Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia and was [renamed](#) the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership.

Writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, Nicholas Schmidle [noted](#) that the program saw year-round deployments of Special Forces personnel “to train local armies at battling insurgencies and rebellions and to prevent bin Laden and his allies from expanding into the region.” The Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Partnership and its Defense Department companion program, then known as Operation Enduring Freedom-Trans-Sahara, were, in turn, [folded](#) into U.S. Africa Command when it took over military responsibility for the continent in 2008.

As Schmidle noted, the effects of U.S. efforts in the region seemed at odds with AFRICOM’s stated goals. “Al Qaeda established sanctuaries in the Sahel, and in 2006 it acquired a North African franchise [Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb],” he [wrote](#). “Terrorist attacks in the region increased in both number and lethality.”

In fact, a look at the official State Department list of terrorist organizations indicates a steady increase in Islamic radical groups in Africa alongside the growth of U.S. counterterrorism efforts there — with the [addition](#) of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in 2004, Somalia’s al-Shabaab in 2008, and Mali’s Ansar al-Dine in 2013. In 2012, General Carter Ham, then AFRICOM’s chief, [added](#) the Islamist militants of Boko Haram in Nigeria to his own list of extremist threats.

The overthrow of Qaddafi in Libya by an interventionist coalition [including](#) the U.S., France, and Britain similarly empowered a host of new militant Islamist groups such as the Omar Abdul Rahman Brigades, which have since carried out multiple [attacks](#) on Western interests, and the al-Qaeda-linked [Ansar al-Sharia](#), whose fighters [assaulted](#) U.S. facilities in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, killing Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. In fact, just prior to that attack, according to the *New York Times*, the CIA was

[tracking](#) “an array of armed militant groups in and around” that one city alone.

According to [Frederic Wehrey](#), a senior policy analyst with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and an expert on Libya, that country is now “fertile ground” for militants arriving from the Arabian Peninsula and other places in the Middle East as well as elsewhere in Africa to recruit fighters, receive training, and recuperate. “It’s really become a new hub,” he told me.

Obama’s Scramble for Africa

The U.S.-backed war in Libya and the CIA’s efforts in its aftermath are just two of the many operations that have proliferated across the continent under President Obama. These include a multi-pronged military and CIA campaign against militants in Somalia, consisting of intelligence operations, a secret prison, helicopter attacks, [drone strikes](#), and U.S. commando raids; a special ops [expeditionary force](#) (bolstered by [State Department](#) experts) dispatched to help capture or kill Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) leader Joseph Kony and his top commanders in the [jungles](#) of the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo; a massive influx of funding for counterterrorism operations across East Africa; and, in just the last four years, hundreds of millions of dollars spent arming and training West African troops to [serve](#) as American proxies on the continent. From 2010-2012, AFRICOM itself burned through \$836 million as it expanded its reach across the region, primarily via programs to mentor, advise, and tutor African militaries.

In recent years, the U.S. has [trained](#) and outfitted soldiers from Uganda, Burundi, and Kenya, among other nations, for missions like the [hunt](#) for Kony. They have also served as a [proxy force](#) for the U.S. in Somalia, part of the [African Union Mission](#) (AMISOM) protecting the [U.S.-supported](#) government in that country’s capital, Mogadishu. Since 2007, the State Department has anted up about \$650 million in logistics support, equipment, and training for AMISOM troops. The Pentagon has kicked in an extra \$100 million since 2011.

The U.S. also continues funding African armies through the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership and its Pentagon analog, now known as Operation Juniper Shield, with increased support flowing to Mauritania and Niger in the wake of Mali’s collapse. In 2012, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development poured approximately \$52 million into the programs, while the Pentagon chipped in another \$46 million.

In the Obama years, U.S. Africa Command has also built a sophisticated logistics system officially [known](#) as the AFRICOM Surface Distribution Network, but colloquially referred to as the “[new spice route](#).” Its central nodes are in Manda Bay, Garissa, and Mombasa in Kenya; Kampala and Entebbe in Uganda; Bangui and Djema in Central African Republic; Nzara in South Sudan; Dire Dawa in Ethiopia; and the Pentagon’s showpiece African base, Camp Lemonnier.

In addition, the Pentagon has [run](#) a regional air campaign using drones and manned aircraft out of airports and bases across the continent including Camp Lemonnier, Arba Minch airport in Ethiopia, [Niamey](#) in Niger, and the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean, while private contractor-operated surveillance aircraft have flown missions out of [Entebbe](#), [Uganda](#). Recently, *Foreign Policy* [reported](#) on the existence of a possible drone base in Lamu, Kenya.

Another critical location is Ouagadougou, the capital of [Burkina Faso](#), home to a Joint Special

Operations Air Detachment and the Trans-Sahara Short Take-Off and Landing Airlift Support initiative that, according to military documents, supports “high risk activities” carried out by elite forces from Joint Special Operations Task Force-Trans Sahara. Lieutenant Colonel Scott Rawlinson, a spokesman for Special Operations Command Africa, told me that the initiative provides “emergency casualty evacuation support to small team engagements with partner nations throughout the Sahel,” although official documents note that such actions have historically accounted for just 10% of monthly flight hours.

While Rawlinson demurred from discussing the scope of the program, citing operational security concerns, military documents indicate that it is expanding rapidly. Between March and December of last year, for example, the Trans-Sahara Short Take-Off and Landing Airlift Support initiative flew 233 sorties. In just the first three months of this year, it carried out 193.

AFRICOM spokesman Benjamin Benson has confirmed to TomDispatch that U.S. air operations conducted from Base Aérienne 101 in Niamey, the capital of Niger, were providing “support for intelligence collection with French forces conducting operations in Mali and with other partners in the region.” Refusing to go into detail about mission specifics for reasons of “operational security,” he added that, “in partnership with Niger and other countries in the region, we are committed to supporting our allies... this decision allows for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations within the region.”

Benson also confirmed that the U.S. military has used Léopold Sédar Senghor International Airport in Senegal for refueling stops as well as the “transportation of teams participating in security cooperation activities” like training missions. He confirmed a similar deal for the use of Addis Ababa Bole International Airport in Ethiopia. All told, the U.S. military now has agreements to use 29 international airports in Africa as refueling centers.

Benson was more tight-lipped about air operations from Nzara Landing Zone in the Republic of South Sudan, the site of one of several shadowy forward operating posts (including another in Djema in the Central Africa Republic and a third in Dungu in the Democratic Republic of Congo) that have been used by U.S. Special Operations forces. “We don’t want Kony and his folks to know... what kind of planes to look out for,” he said. It’s no secret, however, that U.S. air assets over Africa and its coastal waters include Predator, Global Hawk and Scan Eagle drones, MQ-8 unmanned helicopters, EP-3 Orion aircraft, Pilatus planes, and E-8 Joint Stars aircraft.

Last year, in its ever-expanding operations, AFRICOM planned 14 major joint-training exercises on the continent, including in Morocco, Uganda, Botswana, Lesotho, Senegal, and Nigeria. One of them, an annual event known as [Atlas Accord](#), saw members of the U.S. Special Forces travel to Mali to conduct training with local forces. “The participants were very attentive, and we were able to show them our tactics and see theirs as well,” [said](#) Captain Bob Luther, a team leader with the 19th Special Forces Group.

The Collapse of Mali

As the U.S.-backed war in Libya was taking down Qaddafi, nomadic Tuareg fighters in his service looted the regime’s extensive weapons caches, [crossed](#) the border into their native Mali, and began to take over the northern part of that country. Anger within the country’s armed forces over the democratically elected government’s ineffective response to the

rebellion resulted in a military coup. It was led by Amadou Sanogo, an officer who had [received](#) extensive training in the U.S. between 2004 and 2010 [as part](#) of the Pan-Sahel Initiative. Having overthrown Malian democracy, he and his fellow officers proved even less effective in [dealing](#) with events in the north.

With the country in turmoil, the Tuareg fighters declared an independent state. Soon, however, heavily-armed Islamist rebels from homegrown [Ansar al-Dine](#) as well as [Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb](#), Libya's [Ansar al-Sharia](#), and Nigeria's [Boko Haram](#), among others, pushed out the Tuaregs, took over much of the north, instituted a harsh brand of Shariah law, and created a humanitarian crisis that caused widespread [suffering](#), sending refugees streaming from their homes.

These developments raised serious questions about the efficacy of U.S. counterterrorism efforts. "This spectacular failure reveals that the U.S. probably underestimated the complex socio-cultural peculiarities of the region, and misread the realities of the terrain," [Berny Sèbe](#), an expert on North and West Africa at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom, told me. "This led them to being grossly manipulated by local interests over which they had, in the end, very limited control."

Following a further series of Islamist victories and widespread [atrocities](#), the French military [intervened](#) at the head of a coalition of Chadian, Nigerian, and other African troops, with support from the [U.S.](#) and the [British](#). The foreign-led forces beat back the Islamists, who then shifted from conventional to guerrilla tactics, including suicide bombings.

In April, after such an attack killed three Chadian soldiers, that country's president announced that his forces, long supported by the U.S. through the Pan-Sahel Initiative, would withdraw from Mali. "Chad's army has no ability to face the kind of guerrilla fighting that is emerging," he [said](#). In the meantime, the remnants of the U.S.-backed Malian military fighting alongside the French were [cited](#) for gross human rights violations in their bid to retake control of their country.

After the French intervention in January, then-Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said, "There is no consideration of putting any American boots on the ground at this time." Not long after, 10 U.S. military personnel were [deployed](#) to assist French and African forces, while 12 others were assigned to the embassy in the Malian capital, Bamako.

While he's quick to point out that Mali's downward spiral had much to do with its corrupt government, weak military, and rising levels of ethnic discontent, the Carnegie Endowment's [Wehrey](#) notes that the war in Libya was "a seismic event for the Sahel and the Sahara." Just back from a fact-finding trip to Libya, he added that the effects of the revolution are already rippling far beyond the porous borders of Mali.

Wehrey cited recent findings by the United Nations Security Council's Group of Experts, which monitors an arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011. "In the past 12 months," the panel [reported](#), "the proliferation of weapons from Libya has continued at a worrying rate and has spread into new territory: West Africa, the Levant [the Eastern Mediterranean region], and potentially even the Horn of Africa. Illicit flows [of arms] from the country are fueling existing conflicts in Africa and the Levant and enriching the arsenals of a range of non-state actors, including terrorist groups."

Growing Instability

The collapse of Mali after a coup by an American-trained officer and Chad's flight from the fight in that country are just two indicators of how post-9/11 U.S. military efforts in Africa have fared. "In two of the three other Sahelian states involved in the Pentagon's pan-Sahelian initiative, Mauritania and Niger, armies trained by the U.S., have also taken power in the past eight years," [observed](#) journalist William Wallis in the *Financial Times*. "In the third, Chad, they came close in a 2006 attempt." Still another coup plot involving members of the Chadian military was reportedly [uncovered](#) earlier this spring.

In March, Major General Patrick Donahue, the commander of U.S. Army Africa, told interviewer Gail McCabe that northwestern Africa was now becoming increasingly "problematic." Al-Qaeda, he said, was at work destabilizing Algeria and Tunisia. Last September, in fact, hundreds of Islamist protesters [attacked](#) the U.S. embassy compound in Tunisia, setting it on fire. More recently, Camille Tawil in the *CTC Sentinel*, the official publication of the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, [wrote](#) that in Tunisia "jihadis are openly recruiting young militants and sending them to training camps in the mountains, especially along Algeria's borders."

The U.S.-backed French intervention in Mali also led to a January revenge terror [attack](#) on the Amenas gas plant in Algeria. Carried out by the al-Mulathameen brigade, one of various new al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb-linked militant groups emerging in the region, it led to the deaths of close to 40 hostages, including three Americans. Planned by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a veteran of the U.S.-backed war against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, it was only the first in a series of blowback responses to U.S. and Western interventions in Northern Africa that may have far-reaching implications.

Last month, Belmokhtar's forces also [teamed](#) up with fighters from the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa — yet another Islamist militant group of recent vintage — to carry out coordinated attacks on a French-run uranium mine and a nearby military base in Agadez, Niger, that [killed](#) at least 25 people. A recent attack on the French embassy in Libya by local militants is also [seen](#) as a reprisal for the French war in Mali.

According to the Carnegie Endowment's Wehrey, the French military's push there has had the additional effect of reversing the flow of militants, sending many back into Libya to recuperate and seek additional training. Nigerian Islamist fighters driven from Mali have [returned](#) to their native land with fresh training and innovative tactics as well as heavy weapons from Libya. Increasingly battle-hardened, extremist Islamist insurgents from two Nigerian groups, Boko Haram and the newer, even more radical [Ansaru](#), have escalated a long simmering conflict in that West African oil giant.

For years, Nigerian forces have been trained and supported by the U.S. through the Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program. The country has also been a beneficiary of U.S. Foreign Military Financing, which provides grants and loans to purchase U.S.-produced weaponry and equipment and funds military training. In recent years, however, brutal [responses](#) by Nigerian forces to what had been a [fringe](#) Islamist sect have transformed Boko Haram into a [regional terrorist force](#).

The situation has grown so serious that President Goodluck Jonathan recently declared a state of emergency in northern Nigeria. Last month, Secretary of State John Kerry [spoke out about](#) "credible allegations that Nigerian security forces are committing gross human rights violations, which, in turn, only escalate the violence and fuel extremism." After a Boko Haram militant killed a soldier in the town of Baga, for example, Nigerian troops [attacked](#)

the town, destroying more than 2,000 homes and killing an estimated 183 people.

Similarly, [according](#) to a recent United Nations report, the Congolese army's 391st Commando Battalion, formed with U.S. support and [trained](#) for eight months by U.S. Special Operations forces, later took part in mass rapes and other atrocities. Fleeing the advance of a recently formed, brutal (non-Islamic) rebel group known as M23, its troops [joined](#) with other Congolese soldiers in raping close to 100 women and more than 30 girls in November 2012.

"This magnificent battalion will set a new mark in this nation's continuing transformation of an army dedicated and committed to professionalism, accountability, sustainability, and meaningful security," [said](#) Brigadier General Christopher Haas, the head of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa at the time of the battalion's graduation from training in 2010.

Earlier this year, incoming AFRICOM commander General David Rodriguez told the Senate Armed Services Committee that a review of the unit found its "officers and enlisted soldiers appear motivated, organized, and trained in small unit maneuver and tactics" even if there were "limited metrics to measure the battalion's combat effectiveness and performance in protecting civilians." The U.N. report [tells](#) a different story. For example, it describes "a 14 year old boy... shot dead on 25 November 2012 in the village of Kalungu, Kalehe territory, by a soldier of the 391 Battalion. The boy was returning from the fields when two soldiers tried to steal his goat. As he tried to resist and flee, one of the soldiers shot him."

Despite years of U.S. military aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo, M23 has dealt its army heavy blows and, according to AFRICOM's Rodriguez, is now destabilizing the region. But they haven't done it alone. According to Rodriguez, M23 "would not be the threat it is today without external support including evidence of support from the Rwandan government."

For years, the U.S. [aided](#) Rwanda through various programs, including the International Military Education and Training initiative and Foreign Military Financing. Last year, the U.S. [cut](#) \$200,000 in military assistance to Rwanda — a signal of its disapproval of that government's support for M23. Still, as AFRICOM's Rodriguez admitted to the Senate earlier this year, the U.S. continues to "support Rwanda's participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions in Africa."

After years of U.S. assistance, including support from Special Operations forces advisors, the Central African Republic's military was recently defeated and the country's president ousted by another newly formed (non-Islamist) rebel group known as [Seleka](#). In short order, that country's army chiefs [pledged](#) their allegiance to the leader of the coup, while hostility on the part of the rebels [forced](#) the U.S. and its allies to suspend their hunt for Joseph Kony.

A strategic partner and bulwark of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, Kenya receives around \$1 billion in U.S. aid annually and elements of its military have been [trained](#) by U.S. Special Operations forces. But last September, *Foreign Policy's* Jonathan Horowitz [reported](#) on allegations of "Kenyan counterterrorism death squads... killing and disappearing people." Later, Human Rights Watch [drew](#) attention to the Kenyan military's response to a November attack by an [unknown gunman](#) that killed three soldiers in the northern town of Garissa. The "Kenyan army surrounded the town, preventing anyone from leaving or entering, and started attacking residents and traders," the group reported. "The witnesses said that the military shot at people, raped women, and assaulted anyone in sight."

Another longtime recipient of U.S. support, the Ethiopian military, was also involved in abuses last year, following an attack by gunmen on a commercial farm. In response, [according](#) to Human Rights Watch, members of Ethiopia's army raped, arbitrarily arrested, and assaulted local villagers.

The Ugandan military has been the primary U.S. proxy when it comes to policing Somalia. Its members were, however, [implicated](#) in the beating and even killing of citizens during domestic unrest in 2011. Burundi has also [received](#) significant U.S. military [support](#) and high-ranking officers in its army have recently been linked to the illegal mineral trade, [according](#) to a report by the environmental watchdog group Global Witness. Despite years of [cooperation](#) with the U.S. military, Senegal now appears more vulnerable to extremism and increasingly unstable, [according](#) to a report by the Institute of Security Studies.

And so it goes across the continent.

Success Stories

In addition to the Gulf of Guinea, AFRICOM's chief spokesman pointed to Somalia as another major U.S. success story on the continent. And it's true that Somalia is [more stable](#) now than it has been in years, even if a weakened al-Shabaab [continues](#) to [carry out](#) attacks. The spokesman even pointed to a recent CNN [report](#) about a trickle of tourists entering the war-torn country and the construction of a luxury beach resort in the capital, Mogadishu.

I asked for other AFRICOM success stories, but only those two came to his mind — and no one should be surprised by that.

After all, in 2006, before AFRICOM came into existence, 11 African nations [were among](#) the top 20 in the Fund for Peace's annual Failed States Index. Last year, that number had [risen](#) to 15 (or 16 if you [count](#) the new nation of South Sudan).

In 2001, according to the Global Terrorism Database from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland, there [were](#) 119 terrorist incidents in sub-Saharan Africa. By 2011, the last year for which numbers are available, there [were](#) close to 500. A recent report from the International Center for Terrorism Studies at the Potomac Institute for Policy Studies [counted](#) 21 terrorist attacks in the Maghreb and Sahel regions of northern Africa in 2001. During the Obama years, the figures have fluctuated between 144 and 204 annually.

Similarly, an [analysis](#) of 65,000 individual incidents of political violence in Africa from 1997 to 2012, assembled by researchers affiliated with the International Peace Research Institute, [found](#) that "violent Islamist activity has increased significantly in the past 15 years, with a particular[ly] sharp increase witnessed from 2010 onwards." Additionally, according to researcher [Caitriona Dowd](#), "there is also evidence for the geographic spread of violent Islamist activity both south- and east-ward on the continent."

In fact, the trends appear stark and eerily mirror statements from AFRICOM's leaders.

In March 2009, after years of training indigenous forces and hundreds of millions of dollars spent on counterterrorism activities, General William Ward, the first leader of U.S. Africa Command, gave its inaugural status report to the Senate Armed Services Committee. It was bleak. "Al-Qaeda," he [said](#), "increased its influence dramatically across north and east Africa over the past three years with the growth of East Africa Al-Qaeda, al Shabaab, and al-

Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).”

This February, after four more years of military engagement, security assistance, training of indigenous armies, and hundreds of millions of dollars more in funding, AFRICOM’s incoming commander General David Rodriguez explained the current situation to the Senate in more ominous terms. “The command’s number one priority is East Africa with particular focus on al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda networks. This is followed by violent extremist [movements] and al-Qaeda in North and West Africa and the Islamic Maghreb. AFRICOM’s third priority is Counter-LRA [Lord’s Resistance Army] operations.”

Rodriguez warned that, “with the increasing threat of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, I see a greater risk of regional instability if we do not engage aggressively.” In addition to that group, he declared al-Shabaab and Boko Haram major menaces. He also mentioned the problems posed by the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa and Ansar al-Dine. Libya, he told them, was threatened by “hundreds of disparate militias,” while M23 was “destabilizing the entire Great Lakes region [of Central Africa].”

In West Africa, he admitted, there was also a major narcotics trafficking problem. Similarly, East Africa was “experiencing an increase in heroin trafficking across the Indian Ocean from Afghanistan and Pakistan.” In addition, “in the Sahel region of North Africa, cocaine and hashish trafficking is being facilitated by, and directly benefitting, organizations like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb leading to increased regional instability.”

In other words, 10 years after Washington began pouring taxpayer dollars into counterterrorism and stability efforts across Africa and its forces first began operating from Camp Lemonnier, the continent has experienced profound changes, just not those the U.S. sought. The University of Birmingham’s Berny Sèbe ticks off post-revolutionary Libya, the collapse of Mali, the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the coup in the Central African Republic, and violence in Africa’s Great Lakes region as evidence of increasing volatility. “The continent is certainly more unstable today than it was in the early 2000s, when the U.S. started to intervene more directly,” he told me.

As the war in Afghanistan — a conflict born of blowback — winds down, there will be greater incentive and opportunity to project U.S. military power in Africa. However, even a cursory reading of recent history suggests that this impulse is unlikely to achieve U.S. goals. While correlation doesn’t equal causation, there is ample evidence to suggest the United States has facilitated a terror diaspora, imperiling nations and endangering peoples across Africa. In the wake of 9/11, Pentagon officials were hard-pressed to show evidence of a major African terror threat. Today, the continent is thick with militant groups that are increasingly crossing borders, sowing insecurity, and throwing the limits of U.S. power into broad relief. After 10 years of U.S. operations to promote stability by military means, the results have been the opposite. Africa has become blowback central.

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