

The U.S. Military's New Normal in Africa: A Secret African Mission and an African Mission that's No Secret

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What is Operation New Normal?

It's a question without an answer, a riddle the U.S. military refuses to solve. It's a secret operation in Africa that no one knows anything about. Except that someone does. His name is Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee Magee. He lives and breathes Operation New Normal. But he doesn't want to breath paint fumes or talk to me, so you can't know anything about it.

Confused? Stay with me.

Whatever Operation New Normal may be pales in comparison to the real "new normal" for U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). The lower-cased variant is bold and muscular. It's an expeditionary force on a war footing. To the men involved, it's a story of [growth](#) and [expansion](#), new [battlefields](#), "[combat](#)," and "[war](#)." It's the [culmination](#) of years of [construction](#), ingratiation, and interventions, the fruits of wide-eyed [expansion](#) and dismal policy [failures](#), the backing of [proxies](#) to fight America's battles, while increasing U.S. personnel and firepower in and around the continent. It is, to quote an officer with AFRICOM, the blossoming of a "[war-fighting combatant command](#)." And unlike Operation New Normal, it's finally heading for a media outlet near you.

Ever Less New, Ever More Normal

Since 9/11, the U.S. military has been ramping up missions on the African continent, funneling money into projects to woo allies, supporting and training [proxy forces](#), conducting humanitarian outreach, carrying out air strikes and commando raids, creating a sophisticated [logistics network](#) throughout the region, and building a string of camps, "cooperative security locations," and bases-by-other-names.

All the while, AFRICOM [downplayed](#) the expansion and much of the media, [with](#) a few [notable exceptions](#), played along. With the end of the Iraq War and the drawdown of combat forces in Afghanistan, Washington has, however, visibly "pivoted" to Africa and, in recent weeks, many [news](#) organizations, [especially](#) those [devoted](#) to the [military](#), have begun [waking](#) up to the [new normal](#) there.

While daily U.S. troop strength continent-wide hovers in the relatively modest range of [5,000](#) to [8,000](#) personnel, an under-the-radar expansion has been constant, with the U.S. military now [conducting](#) operations alongside almost every African military in almost every

African country and [averaging](#) more than a mission a day.

This increased engagement has come at a continuing cost. When the U.S. and other allies intervened in 2011 to aid in the ouster of Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, for instance, it helped set off a chain reaction that led to a security vacuum [destabilizing](#) that country as well as neighboring Mali. The latter saw its elected government [overthrown](#) by a U.S.-trained officer. The former never recovered and has tottered toward failed-state status ever since. Local militias have been [carving out](#) fiefdoms, while killing untold numbers of Libyans — as well, of course, as U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in a September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, the “cradle” of the Libyan revolution, whose forces the U.S. had [aided](#) with training, materiel, and military might.

☒ Quickly [politicized](#) by Congressional Republicans and [conservative](#) news outlets, “[Benghazi](#)” has become a shorthand for many things, including Obama administration [cover-ups](#) and [misconduct](#), as well as White House [lies](#) and [malfeasance](#). Missing, however, has been thoughtful analysis of the implications of American power-projection in Africa or the possibility that blowback might result from it.

Far from being chastened by the Benghazi deaths or chalking them up to a failure to imagine the consequences of armed interventions in situations whose local politics they barely grasp, the Pentagon and the Obama administration have used Benghazi as a growth opportunity, a means to take military efforts on the continent to the next level. “Benghazi” has provided AFRICOM with a beefed-up mandate and new clout. It birthed the new normal in Africa.

The Spoils of Blowback

Those 2012 killings “changed AFRICOM forever,” Major General Raymond Fox, commander of the II Marine Expeditionary Force, [told](#) attendees of a recent Sea-Air-Space conference organized by the [Navy League](#), the Marine Corps, the Coast Guard, and the Merchant Marine. The proof lies in the new “crisis response” forces that have popped up in and around Africa, greatly enhancing the regional reach, capabilities, and firepower of the U.S. military.

Following the debacle in Benghazi, for instance, the U.S. established an Africa-focused force known as Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response ([SP-MAGTF CR](#)) to give AFRICOM quick-reaction capabilities on the continent. “Temporarily positioned” at Morón Air Base in Spain, this rotating unit of Marines and sailors is officially [billed](#) as “a balanced, expeditionary force with built-in command, ground, aviation, and logistics elements and organized, trained, and equipped to accomplish a specific mission.”

Similarly, Benghazi provided the justification for the birthing of another rapid reaction unit, the Commander’s In-Extremis Force. Long in the planning stages and [supported](#) by the head of the Special Operations Command, Admiral William McRaven, the Fort Carson, Colorado-based unit — part of the 10th Special Forces Group — was sent to Europe [weeks after](#) Benghazi. Elements of this specialized [counterterrorism unit](#) are now “constantly forward deployed,” AFRICOM spokesman Benjamin Benson told TomDispatch, and stand “ready for the commander to use, if there’s a crisis.”

The East Africa Response Force (EARF), operating from the lone avowed American base in

Africa — Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti — is another new quick-reaction unit. When asked about EARF, Benson said, “The growing complexity of the security environment demonstrated the need for us to have a [Department of Defense]-positioned response force that could respond to crises in the African region.”

In late December, just days after the 1st Combined Arms Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, out of Fort Riley, Kansas, [arrived](#) in Djibouti to serve as the newly christened EARF, members of the unit were whisked off to South Sudan. Led by EARF’s commander, Lieutenant Colonel Lee Magee, the 45-man platoon was dispatched to that restive nation (midwifed into being by the U.S. only a few years earlier) as it slid toward civil war with armed factions moving close to the U.S. embassy in the capital, Juba. The obvious fear: another Benghazi.

Joined by elements of the Special-Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response and more shadowy [special ops troops](#), members of EARF helped secure and reinforce the embassy and [evacuate](#) Americans. Magee and most of his troops [returned](#) to Djibouti in February, although a few were still serving in South Sudan as recently as [last month](#).

South Sudan, a nation the U.S. [poured](#) much time and effort into [building](#), is lurching toward the brink of genocide, [according](#) to Secretary of State John Kerry. With a ceasefire already [in shambles](#) within hours of being signed, the country stands as another stark foreign policy failure on a [continent](#) now [rife](#) with them. But just as Benghazi proved a useful excuse for dispatching more forward-deployed firepower toward Africa, the embassy scare in South Sudan acted as a convenient template for future crises in which the U.S. military would be even more involved. “We’re basically the firemen for AFRICOM. If something arises and they need troops somewhere, we can be there just like that,” Captain John Young, a company commander with the East Africa Response Force, [told](#) *Stars and Stripes* in the wake of the Juba mission.

The New Normal and the Same Old, Same Old

A batch of official Army Africa documents obtained by TomDispatch convinced me that EARF was intimately connected with Operation New Normal. A July 2013 briefing slide, for instance, references “East Africa Response Force/New Normal,” while another concerning operations on that continent mentions “New Normal Reaction Force East.” At the same time, the phrase “new normal” has been increasingly on the lips of the men running America’s African ops.

Jason Hyland, a 30-year State Department veteran who serves as Foreign Policy Advisor to Brigadier General Wayne Grigsby, the commander of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), for instance, [told](#) an interviewer that the task force “is at the forefront in this region in implementing U.S. policy on the ‘new normal’ to protect our missions when there are uncertain conditions.”

A news release from CJTF-HOA concerning the Juba operation also used the phrase: “While the East Africa Response Force was providing security for the embassy, additional forces were required to continue the evacuation mission. Under the auspices of ‘the new normal,’ which refers to the heightened threat U.S. Embassies face throughout the world, the SP-MAGTF CR arrived from Morón, Spain,” [wrote](#) Technical Sergeant Jasmine Reif.

Earlier this year in *Seapower* magazine, the commander of Special-Purpose Marine Air-

Ground Task Force Crisis Response, Colonel Scott Benedict, [described](#) the “new normal” as a world filled with “a lot of rapidly moving crises,” requiring military interventions and likened it to the Marine Corps deployments in the so-called [Banana Wars](#) in Central America and the Caribbean in the early twentieth century.

On a visit to Camp Lemonnier, Marine commandant General James Amos echoed the same sentiments, [calling](#) his troops “America’s insurance policy.” Referencing the Marine task force, he invoked that [phrase](#) in an even more expansive way. Aside from “winning battles” in Afghanistan, he [said](#), the creation of that force was “probably the most significant thing we’ve done in the last year-and-a-half as far as adjusting the Marine Corps for what people are now calling the new normal, which are these crises that are happening around the world.”

In March, Brigadier General Wayne Grigsby explicitly noted that the phrase meant far more than simple embassy security missions. “Sitting in Djibouti is really the new normal,” the CJTF-HOA commander [said](#). (He was, in fact, sitting in an office in that country.) “It’s not the new normal... as far as providing security for our threatened embassies. It’s really the new normal on how we’re going to operate as a [Department of Defense entity] in supporting the national security strategy of our country.”

Operation New Normal and the Incredible Disappearing Lee Magee

With so many officials talking about the “new normal” and with documents citing a specific operation sporting the same name, I called up AFRICOM’s media chief Benjamin Benson looking for more information. “I don’t know the name new normal,” he told me. “It isn’t a term we’re using to define one of the operations.”

That seemed awfully curious. An official military document obtained by TomDispatch explicitly noted that U.S. troops would be deployed as part of Operation New Normal in 2014. The term was even used, in still another document, alongside other code-named operations like Juniper Micron and Observant Compass, missions to aid the [French and African interventions](#) in Mali and to [degrade or destroy](#) Joseph Kony’s murderous [Lord’s Resistance Army](#) in central Africa.

[Click here to see a larger version](#)



From a 2013 U.S. Army Africa briefing slide referencing Operation New Normal.

Next, I got in touch with Lieutenant Colonel Glen Roberts at CJTF-HOA and explained that I wanted to know about Operation New Normal. His response was effusive and unequivocal: I should speak with Lee Magee — that is [Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee Magee](#), a West Point graduate, third-generation Army officer, and commander of the East African Response Force who had deployed to South Sudan as the nation shattered on the rocks of reality. “He lives this concept and has executed it,” was how Roberts put it.

Was I available to talk to Magee the next day? Yes, indeed.

On March 27th, the day of the proposed interview, however, a lower-ranking public affairs official got in touch to explain that Lieutenant Colonel Magee could not speak to me and Lieutenant Colonel Roberts was out of the office. I asked to reschedule for the next day. The spokesman said he didn’t know what their calendars looked like, but that Roberts was expected back later that day. I left a message, but heard nothing.

The next morning, I called the press office in Djibouti and asked to speak to Magee. He wasn't there. No one was. Everyone had left work early. The reason? "Paint fumes."

That was a new one.

Another follow-up and Roberts finally got back in touch. "Apologies, but I am no longer able to arrange an interview with Magee," he informed me. "Thanks for understanding."

But I didn't understand and told him so. After all, Magee was the man who *lived and executed* the new normal. I thought we were set for an interview. What happened?

"He has simply declined an interview, as is his privilege," was the best Roberts could do. Magee had been dropped into the hot zone in South Sudan to forestall the next Benghazi, and had previously [spoken](#) with other [media outlets](#) about his work in Africa, but conversing with me about Operation New Normal was apparently beyond the pale. Or maybe it had something to do with those paint fumes.

On March 31st, Roberts told me that he could answer the questions by email — questions that I had already sent in on March 17th. But no response came. I followed up again. And again. And again. I sent the questions a second time.

As of publication, almost two months after my initial inquiry, no word yet. That, evidently, is the new normal, too.

The Real New Normal

Quite obviously, the U.S. military isn't eager to talk about Operation New Normal, which — despite Benjamin Benson's contentions, Lee Magee's silence, and Glen Roberts' disappearance — is almost certainly the name for a U.S. military mission in East Africa that, U.S. documents suggest, is tied to the Benghazi-birthered East African Response Force.

More important than uncovering the nature of Operation New Normal, however, is recognizing the real new normal in Africa for the U.S. military: ever-increasing missions across the continent — now [averaging](#) about 1.5 per day — ever more engagement with local [proxies](#) in ever more African countries, the construction of ever more new facilities in ever more countries (including plans for a possible new compound in Niger), and a string of bases [devoted](#) to surveillance activities spreading across the northern tier of Africa. Add to this impressive build-up the three new rapid reaction forces, specialized teams like a [contingent](#) of AFRICOM personnel and officials from the FBI and the departments of Justice, State, and Defense created to help [rescue](#) hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by members of the Islamic militant group Boko Haram, and other shadowy quick-response units like the seldom-mentioned [Naval Special Warfare Unit 10](#).

"Having resources [on the continent] that are ready for a response is really valuable," Benson told me when talking about the Djibouti-based EARF. The same holds for the U.S. military's new normal in Africa: more of everything valuable to a military seeking a new mission in the wake of two fading, none-too-successful wars.

The Benghazi killings, unrest in South Sudan, and now the Boko Haram kidnappings have provided the U.S. with ways to bring a long-running "light footprint in Africa" narrative into line with a far heavier reality. Each crisis has provided the U.S. with further justification for publicizing a steady expansion on that continent that's been underway but under wraps for

years. New forces, new battlefields, and a new openness about a new “war,” to [quote](#) one of the men waging it. That’s the real new normal for the U.S. military in Africa — and you don’t need to talk to Lieutenant Colonel Lee Magee to know it.

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