

# U.S. Military Says It Has a “Light Footprint” in Africa. These Documents Show a Vast Network of Bases.

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*The U.S. military has long insisted that it maintains a “light footprint” in Africa, and there have been [reports](#) of proposed [drawdowns](#) in special operations forces and closures of outposts on the continent, due to a [2017 ambush](#) in Niger and an increasing focus on rivals like China and Russia. But through it all, U.S. Africa Command has fallen short of providing concrete information about its bases on the continent, leaving in question the true scope of the American presence there.*

Documents obtained from AFRICOM by The Intercept, via the Freedom of Information Act, however, offer a unique window onto the sprawling network of U.S. military outposts in Africa, including previously undisclosed or unconfirmed sites in hotspots like Libya, Niger, and Somalia. The Pentagon has also told The Intercept that troop reductions in Africa will be modest and phased-in over several years and that no outposts are expected to close as a result of the personnel cuts.

According to a 2018 briefing by AFRICOM science adviser Peter E. Teil, the military’s constellation of bases includes 34 sites scattered across the continent, with high concentrations in the north and west as well as the Horn of Africa. These regions, not surprisingly, have also seen numerous U.S. drone attacks and low-profile commando raids in recent years. For example, Libya — the site of drone and commando missions, but for which President Donald Trump said he saw no [U.S. military role](#) just last year — is nonetheless home to three previously undisclosed outposts.

“U.S. Africa Command’s posture plan is designed to secure strategic access to key locations on a continent characterized by vast distances and limited infrastructure,” **Gen. Thomas Waldhauser**, the AFRICOM commander, told the [House Armed Services Committee](#) earlier this year, though he didn’t provide specifics on the number of bases. “Our posture network allows forward staging of forces to provide operational flexibility and timely response to crises involving U. S. personnel or interests without creating the optic that U. S. Africa Command is militarizing Africa.”

According to **Adam Moore**, an assistant professor of geography at the University of California, Los Angeles and an [expert on the U.S. military’s presence in Africa](#),

“It is getting harder for the U.S. military to plausibly claim that it has a ‘light footprint’ in Africa. In just the past five years, it has established what is

perhaps the largest drone complex in the world in Djibouti — Chabelley — which is involved in wars on two continents, Yemen, and Somalia.”

Moore also noted that the U.S. is building an even larger drone base in Agadez, Niger.

“Certainly, for people living in Somalia, Niger, and Djibouti, the notion that the U.S. is not militarizing their countries rings false,” he added.

For the last 10 years, AFRICOM has not only sought to define its [presence](#) as [limited](#) in scope, but its military outposts as small, temporary, and little more than local bases where Americans are tenants. For instance, this is how Waldhauser described a [low-profile](#) drone outpost in Tunisia last year: “And it’s not our base, it’s the Tunisians’ base.” On a visit to a U.S. facility in Senegal this summer, the AFRICOM chief took pains to emphasize that the U.S. had no intension of establishing a [permanent base](#) there. Still, there’s no denying the scope of AFRICOM’s network of outposts, nor the growth in infrastructure. Air Forces Africa alone, the command’s air component, has recently completed or is currently working on nearly 30 construction projects across four countries in Africa.

“The U.S. footprint on the African continent has grown markedly over the last decade to promote U.S. security interests on the continent,” Navy **Cmdr. Candice Tresch**, a Pentagon spokesperson, told The Intercept.

While China, France, [Russia](#), and the United Arab Emirates have [increased their own military engagement](#) in [Africa](#) in recent years and a number of countries now possess [outposts](#) on the continent, none approach the wide-ranging U.S. footprint. [China](#), for example, has just one base in Africa – a facility in [Djibouti](#).

According to the documents obtained by The Intercept through the Freedom of Information Act, AFRICOM’s network of bases includes larger “enduring” outposts, consisting of forward operating sites, or FOSes, and cooperative security locations, or CSLs, as well as more numerous austere sites known as contingency locations, or CLs. All of these are located on the African continent except for an FOS on Britain’s Ascension Island in the south Atlantic. Teil’s map of AFRICOM’s “Strategic Posture” names the specific locations of all 14 FOSes and CSLs and provides country-specific locales for the 20 contingency locations. The Pentagon would not say whether the tally was exhaustive, however, citing concerns about publicly providing the number of forces deployed to specific facilities or individual countries. “For reasons of operational security, complete and specific force lay-downs are not releasable,” said Tresch.

While troops and outposts periodically come and go from the continent, and some locations used by commandos conducting sensitive missions are likely kept under wraps, Teil’s map represents the most current and complete accounting available and indicates the areas of the continent of greatest concern to Africa Command.

“The distribution of bases suggests that the U.S. military is organized around three counter-terrorism theaters in Africa: the Horn of Africa — Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya; Libya; and the Sahel — Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso,” says Moore, noting that the U.S. has only one base in the south of the continent and has scaled back engagement in Central Africa in recent years.



U.S. Africa Command's "Strategic Posture" — listing 34 military outposts — from a 2018 briefing by Science Advisor Peter E. Teil. (Source: U.S. Africa Command)

## **Niger, Somalia, and Kenya**

Teil's briefing confirms, for the first time, that the U.S. military currently has more sites in Niger — five, including two cooperative security locations — than any other country on the western side of the continent. Niamey, the country's capital, is the location of Air Base 101, a longtime U.S. drone outpost attached to Diori Hamani International Airport; the site of a Special Operations [Advanced Operations Base](#); and the West Africa node for AFRICOM's contractor-provided [personnel recovery and casualty evacuation services](#). The other CSL, in the remote smuggling hub of Agadez, is set to become the premier U.S. military outpost in West Africa. That drone base, located at [Nigerien Air Base 201](#), not only boasts a [\\$100 million construction price tag](#) but, with operating expenses, is estimated to cost U.S. taxpayers more than a quarter-billion dollars by 2024 when the 10-year agreement for its use ends.

Officially, a CSL is neither "a [U.S. facility or base](#)." It is, according to the military, "simply a location that, when needed and with the permission of the partner country, can be used by U.S. personnel to support a wide range of contingencies." The sheer dimensions, cost, and importance of Agadez seems to suggest otherwise.

"Judging by its size and the infrastructure investments to date, Agadez more resembles massive bases that the military created in Iraq and Afghanistan than a small, unobtrusive, 'lily pad,'" says Moore.

The U.S. military presence in Niger gained widespread exposure last year when an October 4 ambush by ISIS in the Greater Sahara near the Mali border killed four U.S. soldiers, including Green Berets, and wounded two others. A Pentagon investigation into the attack shed additional light on other key U.S. military sites in Niger including [Ouallam](#) and [Arlit](#), where Special Operations forces (SOF) deployed in 2017, and [Maradi](#), where SOF were sent in 2016. Arlit also appeared as a proposed contingency location in a formerly secret 2015 AFRICOM posture plan obtained by The Intercept. [Ouallam](#), which was listed in [contracting documents](#) brought to light by The Intercept last year, was the site of an SOF effort to train and equip a Nigerian counterterrorism company as well as another effort to conduct operations with other local units. Contracting documents from 2017 also noted the need for 4,400 gallons per month of gasoline, 1,100 gallons per month of diesel fuel, and 6,000 gallons of aviation turbine fuel to be delivered, every 90 days, to a "military installation" in [Dirkou](#).

While the five bases in Niger anchor the west of the continent, the five U.S. outposts in Somalia are tops in the east. Somalia is the East Africa hub for contractor-provided [personnel recovery and casualty evacuation services](#) as well as the main node for the military's own personnel recovery and casualty evacuation operations. These sites, revealed in AFRICOM maps for the first time, do not include a [CIA base revealed in 2014](#) by The Nation.

All U.S. military facilities in Somalia, by virtue of being contingency locations, are unnamed on AFRICOM's 2018 map. Previously, [Kismayo](#) has been identified as a key outpost, while

the declassified 2015 AFRICOM posture plan names proposed CLs in Baidoa, Bosaaso, and the capital, Mogadishu, as well as Berbera in the self-declared state of Somaliland. If locations on Teil's map are accurate, one of the Somali sites is located in this latter region. Reporting by Vice News earlier this year indicated there were actually [six new U.S. facilities](#) being constructed in Somalia as well as the expansion of [Baledogle](#), a base for which a contract for "emergency runway repairs" was recently issued.

According to top secret documents obtained by [The Intercept](#) in 2015, elite troops from a unit known as Task Force 48-4 were involved in drone attacks in Somalia earlier this decade. This air war has continued in the years since. The U.S. has already conducted 36 air strikes in Somalia this year, compared to 34 for all of 2017 and 15 in 2016, according to the [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#).

Somalia's neighbor, Kenya, boasts four U.S. bases. These include cooperative security locations at Mombasa as well as Manda Bay, where a 2013 [Pentagon study](#) of secret drone operations in Somalia and Yemen noted that [two manned fixed-wing aircraft](#) were then based. AFRICOM's 2015 posture plan also mentions contingency locations at [Lakipia](#), the site of a Kenyan Air Force base, and another Kenyan airfield at Wajir that was upgraded and [expanded](#) by the U.S. Navy earlier in this decade.

### **Libya, Tunisia, and Djibouti**

Teil's map shows a cluster of three unnamed and previously unreported contingency locations near the Libyan coastline. Since 2011, the U.S. has carried out approximately 550 [drone strikes](#) targeting al Qaeda and Islamic State militants in the restive North African nation. During a four-month span in 2016, for example, there were around 300 such attacks, [according](#) to U.S. officials. That's seven times more than the 42 confirmed U.S. drone strikes carried out in Somalia, Yemen, and Pakistan combined for all of 2016, [according](#) to data compiled by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a London-based nonprofit news organization. The Libya attacks have continued under the Trump administration, with the latest acknowledged U.S. drone strike occurring near Al Uwaynat on November 29. AFRICOM's 2015 posture plan listed only an outpost at [Al-Wigh](#), a Saharan airfield near that country's borders with Niger, Chad, and Algeria, located far to the south of the three current CLs.

Africa Command's map also shows a contingency location in neighboring Tunisia, possibly Sidi Ahmed Air Base, a key regional U.S. [drone](#) outpost that has played an important role in air strikes in Libya in recent years.

"You know, flying [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance](#) drones out of Tunisia has been taking place for quite some time," said Waldhauser, the AFRICOM commander, last year. "[W]e fly there, it's not a secret, but we are very respectful to the Tunisians' desires in terms of, you know, how we support them and the fact that we have [a] low profile..."

Djibouti is home to the crown jewel of U.S. bases on the continent, Camp Lemonnier, a former [French Foreign Legion](#) outpost and AFRICOM's lone forward operating site on the continent. A longtime hub for [counterterrorism operations](#) in Yemen and Somalia and the home of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), Camp Lemonnier hosts around [4,000 U.S. and allied personnel](#), and, according to Teil, is the "main platform" for U.S. crisis response forces in Africa. Since 2002, the base has expanded from 88 acres to

nearly 600 acres and spun off a satellite outpost — a cooperative security location 10 kilometers to the southwest, where drone operations in the country were relocated in 2013. [Chabelley Airfield](#) has gone on to serve as an integral base for missions in [Somalia](#) and [Yemen](#) as well as the drone war against the [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria](#).

“United States military personnel remain deployed to Djibouti, including for purposes of posturing for counterterrorism and counter-piracy operations in the vicinity of the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and to provide contingency support for embassy security augmentation in East Africa,” [President Donald Trump](#) noted in June.



A map of U.S. military bases — forward operating sites, cooperative security locations, and contingency locations — across the African continent from declassified Fiscal Year 2015 U.S. Africa Command planning documents. (Source: U.S. Africa Command)

### **Cameroon, Mali, and Chad**

AFRICOM’s strategic posture also includes two contingency locations in Cameroon. One is an outpost in the north of the country, known as [CL Garoua](#), which is used to fly [drone missions](#) and also as a base for the [Army’s Task Force Darby](#), which supports Cameroonian forces fighting the terrorist group Boko Haram. Cameroon is also home to a longtime outpost in [Douala](#) as well as U.S. facilities in Maroua and a nearby base called Salak, which is also used by U.S. personnel and private contractors for training missions and drone surveillance. In 2017, Amnesty International, the London-based research firm Forensic Architecture, and The Intercept [exposed](#) illegal imprisonment, torture, and killings by Cameroonian troops at Salak.

In neighboring Mali, there are two contingency locations. AFRICOM’s 2015 posture plan lists proposed CLs in Gao and Mali’s capital, Bamako. The 2018 map also notes the existence of a CSL in Chad’s capital [N’Djamena](#), a site where the U.S. began flying drones earlier this decade; it’s also the headquarters of a [Special Operations Command and Control Element](#), an elite battalion-level command. Another unidentified contingency location in Chad could be a CL in Faya Largeau, which was mentioned in AFRICOM’s 2015 posture plan.

In Gabon, a cooperative security location exists in Libreville. Last year, U.S. troops carried out an exercise there to test their ability to turn the Libreville CSL into a [forward command post](#) to facilitate an influx of a large number of forces. A CSL can also be found in [Accra, Ghana](#), and another CSL is located on a small compound at [Captain Andalla Cissé Air Base](#) in Dakar, Senegal.

“This location is very important to us because it helps mitigate the time and space on the continent the size of Africa,” said AFRICOM commander Waldhauser while visiting the Senegalese capital earlier this year.

Only one base lies in the far south of the continent, a CSL in Botswana’s capital, Gaborone, that is [run by the Army](#). To its north, CSL Entebbe in Uganda has long been an important [air base](#) for American forces in Africa, serving as a hub for [surveillance aircraft](#). It also proved

integral to Operation Oaken Steel, the July 2016 rapid deployment of troops to rescue U.S. personnel after fighting broke out near the American Embassy in Juba, South Sudan.

### “We Have Increased the Firepower”

In May, responding to questions about measures taken after the October 2017 ambush in Niger, [Waldhauser](#) spoke of fortifying the U.S. presence on the continent.

“We have increased, which I won’t go into details here, but we have increased the firepower, we’ve increased the ISR [intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance] capacity, we’ve increased various response times,” he said. “So we have beefed up a lot of things posture-wise with regard to these forces.” This firepower includes drones. “We have been [arming out of Niger](#), and we’ll use that as appropriate,” Waldhauser noted this summer, alluding to the presence of armed remotely piloted aircraft, or RPAs, now based there.

AFRICOM did not respond to multiple requests to interview Waldhauser.

After months of reports that the Defense Department was considering a [major drawdown](#) of Special Operations forces in Africa as well as the closure of military outposts in Tunisia, Cameroon, Libya and Kenya, the Pentagon now says that less than 10 percent of 7,200 forces assigned to AFRICOM will be withdrawn over several years and no bases will close as a result. In fact, U.S. base construction in Africa is booming. Air Forces Africa spokesperson **Auburn Davis** told The Intercept that the Air Force recently completed 21 construction projects in Kenya, Tunisia, Niger and Djibouti and currently has seven others underway in Niger and Djibouti.

“The proliferation of bases in the Sahel, Libya, and Horn of Africa suggests that AFRICOM’s counterterrorism missions in those regions of the continent will continue indefinitely,” Moore told The Intercept.

Hours after Moore made those comments, the Pentagon announced that six firms had been named under a potential [five-year, \\$240 million contract](#) for design and construction services for naval facilities in Africa, beginning with the expansion of the tarmac at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti.

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