

AFRICOM: A New American Military Command

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Brief Analysis

This month, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates will appoint a commander for the newly created U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). Set to launch sometime this fall and become fully operational with 1,000 American personnel by September 2008, AFRICOM will be responsible for all African countries except Egypt. Although no African state poses a direct threat to the United States, Washington is concerned about the growth of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups throughout the continent. Africa has the fastest population growth rate in the world, and several of its countries, such as Nigeria, Angola, Libya, and Sudan, are important sources of crude oil.

By placing Africa under a single commander, AFRICOM will herald a new mindset regarding U.S. policy in the region. Similarly, the chosen location (or locations) of the new command's headquarters will be a symbol of American priorities and prestige on the continent. Although the greater Middle East will now fall within the jurisdiction of three commands rather than two, AFRICOM's creation signals an important structural rethinking of the U.S. military's view of the region.

The Terrorist Threat in Africa

U.S. military activities in Africa date back to the Barbary Wars that began in 1801, but the continent was not incorporated into the U.S. military command structure until 1952, when several North African countries were added to European Command (EUCOM). From the 1940s until 1971, the United States maintained 4,000 military personnel at Wheelus Air Base near Tripoli, Libya, as well as at several much smaller airbases in Morocco. The State Department created its Africa Bureau in 1957 after then-vice president Richard Nixon conducted a three-week tour of the continent. In the early 1990s, more than 25,000 U.S. troops were stationed in eastern Africa as part of the Unified Task Force (UNITAF), the UN-sanctioned humanitarian mission to Somalia. Past military engagements aside, it is the recent growth of terrorist movements in Africa that has catalyzed the Defense Department to increase its focus there.

Middle Eastern terrorist groups have a long history of targeting Western interests in Africa. In 1973, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) terrorists assassinated U.S. ambassador to Sudan Cleo Noel, Jr. Two decades later, from 1991 to 1996, Sudan hosted Osama bin Laden. In 1998, al-Qaeda carried out near-simultaneous bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in what is recognized as its first direct attack on U.S. interests. In 2002, terrorists bombed a popular Israeli tourist resort in Mombassa, killing thirteen people, and launched surface-to-air missiles at an Israeli jetliner carrying 270 tourists, barely missing. On April 14, 2007, suicide bombers unsuccessfully targeted the U.S. consulate and an American cultural center in Casablanca, Morocco. In total, 123 of the 209 terrorist attacks carried out in Africa since 2001 have occurred in Arab League states where terrorist groups are able to evade central government forces by hiding in desert regions.

Recent evidence also suggests that terrorist groups have raised significant funds in Africa. For example, al-Qaeda reportedly procured diamonds worth \$30-50 million from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and its Liberian

commander, Charles Taylor, in the month before the September 11 attacks.

In order to counter the growing security threat from autonomous terrorist networks, the United States is seeking to centralize its African military operations. Currently, African countries are divided among three U.S. commands: Central Command (CENTCOM, with jurisdiction over Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, and the Seychelles), Pacific Command (PACOM, with jurisdiction over Madagascar and the Indian Ocean), and EUCOM (responsible for the remaining forty-one African countries). Gates has called this divided responsibility an "outdated arrangement left over from the Cold War," adding that AFRICOM will give the U.S. military "a more effective and integrated approach" to activities on the continent.

Current Military Engagements

AFRICOM will bring various U.S. counterterrorism initiatives across the continent under a unified command. Currently, around 2,000 soldiers are housed in Camp Lemonier, Djibouti -- the only U.S. base in Africa -- working under the authority of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA). CENTCOM established CJTF-HOA in 2002 to provide a forward presence in eastern Africa and detect and disrupt terrorist activities. Primarily involved in humanitarian missions, CJTF-HOA has also led the search for al-Qaeda militants in Somalia (conducting several airstrikes in the process) and patrolled regional waters. In addition, the United States has access to a small series of cooperative security locations ("lily pads") in Kenya, Mali, Morocco, Namibia, Gabon, Senegal, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Sao Tome and Principe.

In general, U.S. security involvement in Africa has increased markedly since 2001. The Pan-Sahel Initiative, created in 2002, brings together the chiefs of staff of Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, Senegal, Nigeria, Mali, Niger, and Chad to improve counterterrorism cooperation. In 2005, 1,000 U.S. troops participated in Flintlock 2005, a counterterrorism training exercise in the Sahara -- the largest U.S. military exercise in Africa since World War II. Most recently, Congress approved \$500 million for the Trans-Saharan Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI) in response to the growing presence of al-Qaeda and related militant groups in North and West Africa. These military initiatives have enhanced ties with many African states, including several Muslim-majority nations.

The New Command

AFRICOM's commander and final headquarters location have yet to be finalized. The command is temporarily based at the Kelley Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany. Ryan Henry, principal deputy undersecretary of defense for policy, recently led two separate tours of African capitals in order to assuage the fears of U.S. allies while securing base rights. His most recent trip included consultations in Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Djibouti, and Ethiopia (the only non-Arab League member). Although Tripoli and Algiers have both rejected U.S. proposals, Morocco and Botswana are willing to host the new command's headquarters.

Morocco is the most likely location for AFRICOM's hub, though Henry has indicated that several headquarter "nodes" would be located in a range of countries. Indicating the importance that Washington places on the new command, CIA director Michael Hayden recently visited Morocco, presumably to persuade the country to host AFRICOM. A moderate Muslim state and key ally in U.S. counterterrorism efforts, Morocco also has close ties to Europe and is the only African country to apply for European Union membership. Moreover, its long coastline overlooks the strategic Strait of Gibraltar, a key shipping lane and a possible terrorist target.

Several media reports have tapped Gen. William Ward, current deputy commander of EUCOM, to head the new command. As the U.S. Army's only four-star African American general, Ward appears to be the natural political choice for the position. He has served in both Egypt and Somalia, and his most recent position was U.S. security coordinator, Israel-Palestinian Authority, in 2005. Well-versed in the region's dynamics and threats, Ward would bring a seasoned hand and deep understanding to the new position.

AFRICOM's creation is driven by several factors: international terrorism across the Sahara, increasing American reliance on African energy, and the overload experienced by CENTCOM and EUCOM as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Removing seven countries from its jurisdiction will allow CENTCOM to focus more on the current conflicts. Other concerns include China's growing rapprochement with African countries. China is now Africa's third-largest trading partner after the United States and France and a major importer of African oil. In addition, Beijing contributed 1,500 peacekeepers to UN missions across the continent in 2004. Although, in Deputy Undersecretary Henry's words, AFRICOM's "principal mission will be in the area of security cooperation and building partnership capability," the new command also gives the United States an effective and flexible operational nucleus to respond to all potential crises in Africa.

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