

Bright Star:

Almost Business As Usual

Oct 15, 2001



Brief Analysis

Bright Star 01/02, the largest multinational exercise in the world, began in Egypt the same day U.S. strikes against Afghanistan commenced. With world and regional attention focused on the war against terrorism, relatively little media notice has been taken of Bright Star. Despite its massive size, the exercise was "expected to be a low-key affair" by the Middle East Newslite. A review of the Egyptian press since October 4 reveals no mention of it, and the Department of Defense (DoD) released only a single, brief announcement on October 3. The U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) Bright Star web page is bare.

The low profile is understandable; President Mubarak, who stated during Rumsfeld's visit on October 5 that Egypt's armed forces would be used only for the defense of Egypt, will want to avoid any impression that the exercise is a cover for Egyptian participation in the military action against Afghanistan. For the United States, the deployment of thousands of troops to Egypt for an exercise amid the current Middle East situation complicates "force protection" issues and at least moderately taxes strategic airlift.

Background

Since its beginning in 1980 as a bilateral exercise between U.S. and Egyptian armies, Bright Star has grown into an enormous multinational event and the cornerstone of CENTCOM exercise and theater engagement programs. According to the DOD, it is designed to improve readiness and interoperability, and to strengthen military relationships among coalition forces.

Bright Star is the "jewel in the crown" of CENTCOM's regional engagement and exercise programs. The previous Bright Star exercise (October 16 -- November 1, 1999) involved over 73,000 military personnel from eleven nations, the largest assemblage of coalition military power in the Middle East since the Gulf War. Besides Egypt and the United States, forces from three other Arab countries and six NATO nations, including Germany, participated. Thirty-three countries including China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, India, Pakistan, Syria, eight other Arab states and nine African states were invited to send observers. The United States deployed 18,000 troops from all armed services including the Coast Guard (8,000 on the ground and the rest at sea), and the United Kingdom brought over 6,000. Egypt contributed by far the largest contingent with 36,000 military personnel.

The exercise normally begins with "affiliation training" (familiarization of the forces with each other's equipment and training methods) and culminates in a combined field training exercise. The 1999 exercise featured air, land, and sea operations -- including amphibious, airborne, and special forces events, culminating in the defense of the Nile River from forces attacking from the west. Bright Star 99/00 also added a computer-aided command post exercise (CPX) phase. The addition of the CPX and the growing international participation turned Bright Star into what CENTCOM called a "baseline for even more ambitious coalition operations in the future."

CENTCOM sees Bright Star as a valuable vehicle for meeting U.S. regional training objectives, especially in light of a 36 percent reduction in CENTCOM's exercise schedule since 1996 (mainly driven by availability of funding and

airlift). Since 1996, Bright Star has also become a useful platform for conducting a regional, multinational exercise that political sensitivities would probably preclude from taking place in the Gulf. Gen. Anthony C. Zinni, then CENTCOM commander, testified to Congress in February 2000 that Bright Star 99/00 "trained U.S. forces, validated U.S. deployment procedures and established coalition interoperability".

In justifying the annual foreign aid request for Egypt (\$1.3 billion in grant military aid and \$800 million in Economic Support Funds), the Clinton administration called Egypt "the most prominent player in the Arab world and a key U.S. ally in the Middle East," and said that "[a] strong relationship with Egypt affords us political and security benefits that no single other Arab state can provide" (Human Rights Watch World Report 1999).

Bright Star has been planned and scripted to be as benign as possible. In the 1999 scenario, friendly "Greenland" forces were able to stop enemy ("Orangeland") invaders but not expel them. Coalition air, sea, and land power then assisted "Greenland" in repelling the enemy. The improvements in Egyptian military capability resulting from U.S. arms, doctrine, and training make Israeli military planners uncomfortable (in light of what they see as a potential future risk), though Israel has not officially objected to Bright Star. Israel would welcome an invitation to observe Bright Star, but that would be strongly opposed by host nation Egypt, particularly in light of the current Israeli-Palestinian situation.

Bright Star 01/02

The United States and Egypt both wanted Bright Star 01/02 to proceed as scheduled, and the U.S. government never considered canceling it. Washington has refined its force protection measures over several years in light of the growing terrorist threat, and Egypt has cooperated fully in accommodating U.S. security concerns. Canceling Bright Star just before it began also could have compromised the element of surprise in U.S. plans to strike Afghanistan.

Senior U.S. military officers and DoD officials have stressed that Bright Star is completely unrelated to the ongoing war against terrorism. The date for the current iteration of this biannual exercise was scheduled two years ago following Bright Star 99/00. The Deputy Commander-in-Chief of CENTCOM, Lt. Gen. Michael DeLong, said there were no plans to redeploy U.S. forces after Bright Star ends on November 1 to support combat operations. Egyptian Maj. Gen. Amin Hussein Ahmed Ibrahim told the media that there was "no relation whatsoever" between the U.S.-led military action in Afghanistan and Bright Star.

It is reasonable to assume that this year's exercise may be scaled back somewhat to accommodate military realities. For example, certain low-density military assets (AWACS, recon planes, or aerial tankers) that may have been scheduled to participate may not be available. The Virginian-Pilot newspaper reported that CENTCOM and the Navy are considering curtailing participation of the USS Theodore Roosevelt in Bright Star to allow the USS Enterprise to return home by Thanksgiving (the "Big E's" scheduled deployment was extended once it became part of the attack on Afghanistan).

The war on terrorism may have affected international participation as well. The United Arab Emirates, the first Arab country other than Egypt to participate (beginning in 1996), has not commented on its reasons for not playing this time. The Netherlands, a participant in 1999, is also staying home, and other nations have reportedly scaled back their participation. However, ten nations, including Kuwait and Jordan, are expected to deploy about 70,000 military personnel. More than twenty other countries will send observers. The U.S. contingent will number approximately 23,000 ashore and afloat -- 5,000 more than in Bright Star 99/00.

Why Now?

Holding Bright Star at this time may be fortuitous:

Apart from its military value in increasing interoperability and coordination among potential members of a regional

defensive coalition, Bright Star is a clear demonstration of U.S. commitment to friendly Arab states.

Canceling the exercise at the last minute would not only have been very costly, it would have risked creating the erroneous impression that the U.S. was dissatisfied with Egypt's support for the war on terrorism.

Executing simultaneously in a single unified command the largest combined exercise in the world while conducting combat operations in Afghanistan, enforcing sanctions against Iraq, and preparing to support further operations is an impressive example of U.S. military capability.

Continuing with Bright Star demonstrates U.S. resolve not to allow terrorism or the U.S. response to affect other important military commitments around the world.

Despite the official statements that there are currently no plans for further use of the deployed U.S. forces, should additional forces be required for the war on terrorism -- or should Saddam Hussein fail to heed U.S. warnings against military adventurism -- Bright Star can become a staging area for onward movement or an effective vehicle for planning and rehearsing coalition operations.

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