
The Pentagon's New Africa Push Counterterrorism is Now a Major Focus of the Year-Old United States Africa Command

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Once the forgotten continent, Africa has growing strategic importance in America's fight against terrorism. A recent commando operation that killed a top organizer for al Qaeda in Somalia is one part of the United States military's new multifaceted approach to regional security, which includes deepening ties between the Pentagon and African armies and putting American soldiers in the role of nation builders.

The absence of stable governments has led to the Horn of Africa becoming a haven for al Qaeda operatives. It is here that United States intelligence recently tracked Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, a Kenyan wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for his involvement in attacks against a hotel in Mombasa in 2002 and in the 1998 bombings of United States embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. On September 14, United States Special Forces troops ambushed and killed Nabhan as his convoy stopped for breakfast in southern Somalia.

United States officials did not waste any time trumpeting the strike. In a speech to the Center for American Progress in Washington the next day, Johnnie Carson, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, hailed Nabhan's death as a blow to al Qaeda and its Somali ally Al Shabab.

We think that his departure from the scene probably makes us all who work in and around East Africa a little bit safer, a little bit more secure, he said.

But two days later, Al Shabab offered its own reply. It launched a successful suicide attack against United States-backed African Union (AU) peacekeepers in Mogadishu. The twin suicide bombing killed some 15 soldiers, including Major General Juvenal Niyoyunguruza, the Burundian Deputy Commander of the AU force. It was the deadliest attack to date against the multinational peacekeepers—Al Shabab called it revenge for Nabhan's killing.

Counterterrorism is now a major focus of the nascent United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) for short. But the command, which is celebrating its one-year anniversary this month, will not always rely on American troops to neutralize the threat posed by extremist groups, at least not directly.

Rather than hunting and killing terrorists, Africa Command focuses on "professionalizing" African militaries so that they can better confront local security challenges on their own, United States Commanders say, while at the same time teaching soldiers to respect human rights and civilian rule. These efforts, however, have possible downsides. In an area of the world still scarred by colonialism, the United States military risks being associated with a rogues' gallery of African military leaders; and it remains to be seen whether an indirect approach can improve the security situation in a country such as Somalia, where the United States-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) is almost powerless.

At its most basic level, Africa Command represents a bureaucratic reshuffling: the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), European Command (EUCOM), and Pacific Commands (PACOM) had divided responsibility for the continent. Building relationships with America's African partners, Commanders said, was difficult when they did not know whether to call Honolulu or Tampa, Florida, to get a desk officer on the phone. "We were not nearly as responsive as we needed to be to the priorities, perspectives, and needs of our African partners," said Navy Vice Admiral Robert Moeller, in a phone interview from the command's headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany. Creating Africa Command was "a clear recognition on the [Pentagon's] part that we need to be organized in a way to much more effectively deal with those things that matter to our African partners."

The United States military had been conducting a variety of exchange programs and training exercises with African militaries. Africa Command (AFRICOM) simply placed these programs under one roof. It also put a new focus on partnering with civilian agencies and African militaries on aid projects, such as, say, funding the construction of Ugandan schools.

Moeller maintains that Africa Command's goal is to ward off conflict:

By not only better preparing their security forces but, through our support for other government agencies that work with these nations, to create the overall conditions.

This would make violent extremism a less attractive option. Still, Moeller added, this mission doesn't mean that the United States military has forsaken the use of force. "If we are directed to take some action as a result of a United States policy decision, we're obviously prepared to do that." Moeller and others stress that Africa Command hasn't superseded State's role in United States-African relations. "None of these types of training activities or programs or exchanges are done without the full concurrence of the chief of mission in that particular country," said Louis Mazel, State's Director of Regional and Security Affairs for Africa.

But many observers still have reservations about the new command. "In Africa, uniforms are feared, even hated," says Berouk Mesfin, an Ethiopian-based researcher with the Institute for Security Studies. "When you have other armies trying to come in, telling people they are coming to help them build schools, clinics, etc.—people are obviously suspicious."

Having Africa Command's Chief, Army General William Ward, appear publicly with African leaders is also problematic, Mesfin warned.

There is a feeling that . . . the roots of the problem in Africa are [actually] the governments in place, the rulers who never want to relinquish power [or] not even to share power, he said. Whenever you are dealing with those guys, that creates a negative impression among the populace. There is no middle ground in Africa.

State's Mazel recognizes that Africa Command's profile can influence public perception of the United States "Do we have a concern about a perception? Yes," he said, "but do we have a concern that there will be a militarization of American foreign policy? No. Foreign-policy formation, foreign-policy implementation on the African continent will be led by civilian elements."

Somalia poses a different policy challenge. "The problem in Somalia is you don't have a partner. You have a Transitional Federal Government, which isn't a government—there is no indirect method," said J. Peter Pham, a fellow at the National Committee on American Foreign Policy who studies the Horn of Africa.

There is also the risk that the United States military is training, and in some cases equipping, African armies for their next war. This summer, the Department of State said it was providing “arms and munitions and training” to the TFG’s modest forces. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia next door, Africa Command maintains a relationship with that country’s National Defense Forces, providing some “limited equipment support.” And AFRICOM helps train that country’s noncommissioned officer corps, said Rear Admiral Anthony Kurta, who commands Camp Lemonier, the United States military base in Djibouti. Ethiopia recently occupied parts of Somalia at the “invitation” of the country’s transitional government, reigniting old tensions between the neighbors.

Policy makers are aware of the risks, Mazel said.

By making a military more proficient, are we creating a more professional army that will pose a risk either to its neighbors or to people in the region? Or are we creating a sort of Praetorian Guard for the leadership of the country? That is certainly not the hope that we have.

While Africa Command is expanding its military-to-military cooperation, the Department of State is also maintaining a program for training African militaries, albeit with a focus on peacekeeping.

Most, if not virtually all, of the African peacekeepers’ training is being done through the DOS, Mazel said. In West Africa, for instance, we have trained, through DOS - funded programs, the new armed forces” in Liberia, he said. But we have also had mentors and trainers come from the military to support what we have been doing. Yes, there has been an overlap there; but it is continuous. It is not as if our civilian trainers are teaching one thing and the AFRICOM [trainers] are teaching another.

The indirect approach being touted by Africa Command is punctuated with demonstrations of United States force, such as the precision strike against Nabhan. Some analysts, however, worry that such attacks may be counterproductive. In the Horn of Africa, Mesfin said, “what people see is actually who had the last laugh.”

Still, Mesfin said that countries in the region are nervous after Al Shabab demonstrated its ability to carry out an organized attack. The suicide bombing in Mogadishu seemed to embolden the group, Mesfin said. Al Shabab warned Djibouti not to send troops to help the AU mission, and it even threatened Nairobi-based Ugandan and Burundian diplomats. The ambassadors “actually received text messages on their mobiles saying that their embassies in Nairobi will be attacked,” Mesfin said. “People are nervous in Nairobi.”

American observers warn against giving Al Shabab too much credit.

Even if Nabhan had not been terminated, [the suicide attack] probably would have happened anyways, Pham said. It was attempted earlier in the summer, and they failed.

One thing is clear: United States policy in Africa will have to be quick to adapt to a fluid situation.

When you get involved in the Horn, you are either supporting one of the parties or changing the balance of power,” Mesfin said. “Acting as a neutral observer does not work.