

Special Global Security Briefing – November 2014

TOO QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT? THE COUNTER-TERRORISM BUILD-UP IN THE SAHEL-SAHARA CONTINUES

Richard Reeve

Summary

In early August, coinciding with the restructuring of French military operations in the Sahel and the US-Africa Leaders Summit, ORG and the [Remote Control Project](#) published a comprehensive assessment of the extent and nature of counter-terrorist operations targeting jihadist groups in the Sahel-Sahara region of northwest Africa. [That report](#) found extensive and increasing evidence of the combat, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), training and equipment, abduction and rendition programmes in this ‘new frontier’ in the ‘War on Terror’. While France and the US were easily the most active foreign actors, the UK, Canada, the Netherlands and several other NATO states were also found to be increasingly involved in special forces and ISR operations.

The launch of that report also coincided with the initiation of air attacks on Islamic State targets, initially by the US in northern Iraq, and latterly by a broad coalition of western and Arab states in both Iraq and Syria. This briefing is an update on the situation in the Sahel-Sahara region in the three months since August. In a context of worsening security crises in Libya, Nigeria and northern Mali and Niger, it tracks an increase in US and UK ISR activity, the reinforcement of French deployments in Mali, and the impetus for foreign intervention in Libya’s civil war by a new tier of Arab states.

Libya on the frontline

Libya is at the core of the security crisis in the Sahel-Sahara. Since the NATO-led military intervention that overthrew the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Libya has been a security and political vacuum and a major exporter of weapons and insecurity to the rest of its region. This has included the return home to the Sahel of hundreds of combatants formerly given refuge or employment by the Libyan state.

Libya’s civil war reignited in May with the launch of ‘Operation Dignity’ by secular forces from the eastern Cyrenaica region to wrest control of Benghazi and Tripoli, the two main cities, from Islamist forces. This has been largely a failure. Most diplomatic missions evacuated Libya in late July and Tripoli and its airport fell to militia from Misrata (Libya’s third city) and allied Islamist groups on 23 August. Benghazi has been increasingly in the hands of Salafist groups. The nearby city of Derna is run as an Islamic emirate by the Ansar al-Shari’a group. Much of the rest of Libya is under local tribal leaders or armed factions, beyond any state control. Indeed, there are now two rival, elected Libyan governments; the one recognised internationally meets in a Tobruk hotel and controls little beyond this Egyptian border outpost. The revived General National Council in Tripoli governs the capital and northwest and is dominated by an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists.

Libya has thus become a new frontier in the proxy war between the international proponents and opponents of the Brotherhood. Qatar and the UAE were the two main Arab sponsors of the anti-Gaddafi rebellion in 2011 and contributed to the air attacks on Libya. They now find themselves backing different sides in Libya. A few days after the Tobruk parliament called for foreign military intervention in Libya, Emirati aircraft based in and refuelled from Egypt launched unclaimed attacks on pro-Islamist militia around Tripoli airport on 17 and 23 August. Despite official denials, it appears that air attacks on Salafist groups in Benghazi in mid-October were launched by Egyptian aircraft. Egypt and the UAE accuse Qatar, the primary sponsor of the Brotherhood in Egypt, and Sudan, long ruled by a military affiliate of the Brotherhood, of funnelling arms to the various Libyan Islamist militia.

While the US has condemned all post-2011 foreign intervention in Libya, it is likely that it was aware of the movement of UAE aircraft to Egypt given that fighter aircraft presumably left from Al-Dhafra air base, Abu Dhabi, which is shared by US and French squadrons. Emirati refuelling aircraft are based at Al-Minhad air base, Dubai, where the Royal Air Force (RAF) has an expeditionary air wing. These aircraft presumably were cleared by Saudi Arabia (another great opponent of the Brotherhood) to overfly its territory.

France stands apart among western allies in its advocacy and preparedness for renewed military intervention in Libya. Since the fall of Tripoli, defence minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has several times advocated a UN mandate for intervention against Islamist groups in Libya and hinted that France may need to act unilaterally in Libya sooner or later. Whereas Egypt is most concerned by Salafist groups in Derna and Benghazi, France is very focused on al-Qaida affiliates in southwest Libya. Already in 2014 it has opened bases near the Niger-Libya and Chad-Libya borders and revived ISR operations from its air base at Faya-Largeau in northern Chad.

Northern Mali and Niger

France cares about southern Libya primarily because of its security commitments to Mali, Chad and Niger, the latter hosting multi-billion euro French investments in uranium production. Since France reorganised its forces in the Sahel from the Mali-focused Opération Serval to the pan-Sahel deployments of Opération Barkhane in mid-2014 the security situation in northern Mali has deteriorated significantly. This relates partly to the decline in French troop numbers there but also to the reorganisation of regional jihadist groups and the deterioration in relations between Malian state and local separatist armed groups. 20 UN peacekeepers from the MINUSMA mission have been killed in at least five jihadist attacks in northern Mali since September. In response, France has had to reinforce its deployments in Kidal district, pulling in troops and equipment from its base in Cote d'Ivoire.

On 9 October, French forces under Barkhane mounted their first publicly acknowledged offensive action outside of Mali, attacking a convoy supposedly transporting militants and weapons from Libya through Niger towards Mali. Militants apparently moving from northeast Mali attacked Nigerien security forces in Ouallam three weeks later, freeing dozens of Islamist prisoners and attacking a refugee camp.

The US has also sought to extend its own ISR deployment in Niger, announcing in early September that it would be moving its two MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial vehicles from Niamey airport, where they have been deployed since early 2013, to Agadez, the main town in the desert north. As

with French redeployments in 2014, the objective appears to be to bring more of southern Libya into range of ISR assets.

Nigeria and beyond

Perhaps least analysed of the post-August military deployments to West Africa have been those associated ostensibly with humanitarian, rather than security, crises. In late August, the RAF deployed several (three is reported) Tornado GR4 aircraft from the UK to the French air base in N'Djamena, Chad. This base is also used by US drones.

Unusually, the Ministry of Defence has issued almost no public comment on this deployment and refuses to disclose how many aircraft were deployed, where they operated from, or exactly when and why they deployed. Officially, the aircraft were on an ISR mission in support of attempts to locate the over 200 girls abducted by Boko Haram from a boarding school in Chibok, northeast Nigeria in April. All had officially returned to the UK by 15 October. While the Tornado GR4 is often deployed as a reconnaissance aircraft, it is dual use and its primary role is as a medium range strike aircraft.

Also very little reported was the US Marine Corps' establishment during September of three new 'cooperative security locations' in Senegal, Ghana and Gabon, along the West African coast. These are to be bases permanently prepared and supplied, but not necessarily manned, to support US interventions under the Obama administration's 'New Normal' doctrine, which facilitates defence or evacuation of US interests and citizens under (terrorist) attack in any country. While Marines and their aircraft may continue to be based in Spain, Italy and Djibouti, these new West African bases are specifically launch pads for future US military interventions. US military contractors have been stockpiling aviation fuel at these and many other African airports for several years.

Interestingly, the Senegal facility has been specifically referred to as an 'interim staging base' – the usual terminology for a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force base – in the context of the US military's humanitarian mission to control the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. As with previous Obama era deployments against the Lord's Resistance Army and in support of the Chibok abductees, the escalation of a US military presence appears to have been achieved under the cover of humanitarian imperatives and initiatives.

Conclusion

While the world's attention has been focused on the US-led military interventions in Iraq and Syria a quieter build-up of military assets has been ongoing along the newer, western front of the War on Terror as the security crises in Libya and northeast Nigeria escalate and the conflict in northern Mali proves to be far from over. While the main actors in the Sahel are familiar, with the US and France increasingly pooling resources and co-locating their assets, the Libyan crisis is attracting a new genre of intervening forces from conservative and Islamist Arab states and increasingly becoming a proxy war.

The political crisis in Burkina Faso, in which the authoritarian president was overthrown in a popular uprising then military coup on 31 October, is further warning of the toxic nature of some of the relationships that western states are forging in the Sahel-Sahara in the name of counter-terrorism. The French and US special forces will probably retain their base in Burkina but there

may well be further trouble ahead for the securitised relationships with the many fragile states and regimes of the region.

Richard Reeve is the Director of the Sustainable Security Programme at Oxford Research Group. He has researched African peace and security issues since 2000, including work on conflict prevention with ECOWAS, the African Union and the Arab League.



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