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Quiet Professionals: The Future Role of U.S. Special Operations in Africa
Matthew A. Stvan

United States Special Operations Forces are beginning to take the lead in U.S. military operations in Africa, highlighting a new combat model for future U.S. campaigns.

The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) has taken a lead role in anti-terror operations since 9/11. Small teams of experienced and well-trained operators have been found to be more adaptable in counter-insurgency efforts than conventional, line unit forces.

Over the course of the U.S. War on Terror, USSOCOM's leadership has established and continually refined an unofficial model of operations that is becoming widely adopted by the U.S. military during its involvement in Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and New Dawn. As these operations draw to a close, SOCOM's operations model is likely to be applied to other theaters of conflict, including the continent of Africa.

The continent of Africa has been increasingly utilized as a stronghold by Islamist terror groups in recent years, including al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabab in Somalia. Africa also accommodates groups accused of human rights violations. One such group is the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which operates in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Central African Republic (CAR), and South Sudan.

Though not a priority in the past, the United States has begun to take a vested interest in the stability and security of the African continent, particularly since the attack on the American diplomatic mission at Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012.

Due to political and diplomatic concerns, U.S. intervention in Africa has mostly been limited to participation in UN peacekeeping missions. Special Operations Forces are heavily utilized when direct action is undertaken, usually in the form of JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) raids on time-sensitive objectives considered to be in the American national interest; most recently, the rescue of Jessica Buchanan and Poul Hagen Thisted from Somalia during Operation Octave Fusion in January 2012. In more sustained conflicts, such as those occurring in the central African nations, the U.S. would not be able to intervene significantly without committing to full-scale operations with conventional forces. For this reason, SOCOM is likely to become a leading influence in future U.S. operations in Africa, as it has been in Afghanistan since 2001.


In previous conventional wars, special warfare units acted primarily in support of conventional troops. However, during operations in Afghanistan, special operations' unique capabilities became vital to U.S. military success in the conflict. Utilizing language and foreign training expertise, U.S. Army Special Forces trained and fought alongside Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers. This strengthened the ability of the Afghan military to engage the Taliban without assistance from NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). 

By providing the training and support necessary for the ANA to become independent, the U.S. has turned them into a force multiplier, allowing ISAF personnel to focus on specific objectives rather than providing regional security. Training and equipping the ANA also enables ISAF to leave Afghanistan with a more capable defense against the Taliban. This strategy of utilizing indigenous forces is already used against the LRA in Central Africa.

On October 14, 2011, U.S. President Barack Obama ordered the deployment of approximately 100 U.S. Special Operations personnel to the LRA's area of operations in and near Uganda. According to unofficial reports, the personnel were part of the U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group out of Fort Carson, Colorado. The primary objective of the deployment was to support Ugandan and other regional forces working to kill or capture Joseph Kony, leader of the LRA. On the President's orders, the SOF personnel were to act as "military advisors" and were only to engage the LRA in self-defense. The U.S. also supplied logistics and intelligence support to regional forces opposing the LRA. This limited role prevents additional combat deployments in the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while still enabling the U.S. to influence the outcome of the conflict.

U.S. Special Operations roles are not limited to advising and training regional forces. SOCOM commands many language and culture specialists assigned to specialized Civil Affairs (CA) units, or attached to Special Forces Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs). Culture and human intelligence (HUMINT) expertise is especially important when SOF operate in a predominantly tribal society, as in Afghanistan. Special Forces receive more advanced cultural awareness training than conventional forces, and are typically more adaptable to varied operating environments. These skills make SOF personnel valuable HUMINT assets when coupled with their knowledge of the strategic situation. This expertise applies well to the cultural situation in many areas of Africa, and will likely contribute significantly to SOCOM involvement in the region.

Additional current conflicts in Africa may become a hotbed for activity by U.S. and other nations' Special Operations Forces in the near future. The rebellion in the Republic of Mali may be a fitting example. Following the fall of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi, an influx of arms and fighters from the Libyan Army into

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215 Ibid, 10.
218 Ibid, 10.
northern Mali strengthened Tuareg insurgent groups in the area.\textsuperscript{222} Soldiers and Tuareg militias in northern Mali rebelled against the Malian government in the south, effectively splitting the country in two.\textsuperscript{223} The rebellion forced Malian forces out of the north, allowing Islamist groups to establish a presence there.\textsuperscript{224}

In January 2013, after the Malian government requested assistance in retaking northern Mali, French forces launched Operation Serval.\textsuperscript{225} This intervention was an effort to aid Malian forces in taking back northern Mali, in order to prevent Islamist groups, such as AQIM, from establishing permanent bases of operation there.\textsuperscript{226} In international military interventions such as this, Special Operations are likely to be utilized in order to keep overall foreign military involvement to the smallest footprint possible. It appears that France has employed this tactic during its involvement in Mali. Reports from a Malian source to the Agence France-Presse (AFP) indicate that French Special Forces are training and fighting with the Malian army.\textsuperscript{227} There are unofficial reports of British\textsuperscript{228} and U.S. Special Forces training troops in Mali as well.\textsuperscript{229} U.S. involvement has thus far been limited to logistical support by air, and further involvement would likely not be advertised by the U.S. government.\textsuperscript{230} Future U.S. intervention in Africa will probably follow a similar model to the French involvement in Mali. U.S. Special Operations will likely have a larger role, as the U.S. Special Operations program is being emphasized more intently following the downsizing of overall U.S. military strength.\textsuperscript{231}

As the United States draws down its conventional role in Afghanistan, as it has in Iraq, Special Operations will begin to take a lead role in U.S. military actions, as the DOD calls for smaller, more flexible forces.\textsuperscript{232} In recent years, the continent of Africa, home to many weak or failing nations, has attracted militant Islamist groups to establish a foothold on the continent. As the U.S. shifts its attention in overseas anti-terror operations away from Afghanistan, it appears that Africa may become the next significant theatre in which USSOCOM will need to prepare to operate.


\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{226} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{231} Weisgerber, "U.S. Special Ops to Grow as DoD Budget Shrinks."

\textsuperscript{232} Ibid.
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