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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.²⁰⁵ 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.²⁰⁶

The continent of Africa has been increasingly utilized as a stronghold by Islamist terror groups in recent years, including al-Qaeda affiliated al-Shabbab in Somalia.²⁰⁷ 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.²⁰⁸ 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, 2012.²⁰⁹

Due to political and diplomatic concerns, U.S. intervention in Africa has mostly been limited to participation in UN peacekeeping missions.²¹⁰ 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 2012.²¹¹ 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 2001.²¹²

²⁰⁵ Litchfield, John D. "Unconventional Counterinsurgency: Leveraging Traditional Social Networks and Irregular Forces in Remote and Ungoverned Areas." *Small Wars Journal* (2010), http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/litchfieldsams_monograph.pdf (accessed March 24, 2014). 24-32.

²⁰⁶ Marcus Weisgerber, "U.S. Special Ops to Grow as DoD Budget Shrinks," *Defense News*. <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20120207/DEFR-EG02/302070009/U-S-Special-Ops-Grow-DoD-Budget-Shrinks> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²⁰⁷ "Al-Shabaab - Terrorist Groups," National Counterterrorism Center. http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/al_shabaab.html (accessed March 1, 2013).

²⁰⁸ Alexis Arieff and Lauren Ploch, "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response," CRS Report for Congress, April 11, 2012. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42094.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2013), Summary.

²⁰⁹ "Accountability Review Board report on Benghazi (Unclassified)," U.S. Department of State. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/202446.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2013), 11-12.

²¹⁰ "FACT SHEET: History of U.S. Military Involvement in Africa," United States Africa Command. <http://www.africom.mil/NEWSROOM/Article/6220/fact-sheet-history-of-us-military-involvement-in-a> (accessed February 19, 2013).

²¹¹ "ShadowSpear Special Operations - Octave Fusion (2012)," ShadowSpear Special Operations. <http://www.shadowsppear.com/special-operations/105849-octave-fusion-2012.html> (accessed March 2, 2013).

²¹² Douglas Waller, "The CIA's Secret Army," February 03, 2003. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1004145,00.html> (accessed March 1, 2013).

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).²¹³ 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.²¹⁴

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.²¹⁵ According to unofficial reports, the personnel were part of the U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group out of Fort Carson, Colorado.²¹⁶ 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.²¹⁷ On the President's orders, the SOF personnel were to act as "military advisors" and were only to engage the LRA in self-

defense.²¹⁸ 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).²¹⁹ Culture and human intelligence (HUMINT) expertise is especially important when SOF operate in a predominantly tribal society, as in Afghanistan.²²⁰ Special Forces receive more advanced cultural awareness training than conventional forces, and are typically more adaptable to varied operating environments.²²¹ 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

²¹³ "3rd SFG Unit History," USASOC. http://www.soc.mil/USASFC/3rd_SFG/UnitHistory.html (accessed March 1, 2013).

²¹⁴ Arieff and Ploch, "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response," 10-11.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 10.

²¹⁶ Jack Murphy, "SOF, Kony 2012, and The Great Game in Central Africa," SOFREP | THE Special Operations Forces Situation Report. <http://sofrep.com/6991/sof-kony-2012-and-the-great-game-in-central-africa/> (accessed February 20, 2013).

²¹⁷ Arieff and Ploch, "The Lord's Resistance Army: The U.S. Response," 10-11.

²¹⁸ Ibid, 10.

²¹⁹ "FM 3-05.40 - Civil Affairs Operations," Federation of American Scientists.

<http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-05-40.pdf> (accessed February 23, 2013), Chapter 3, Page 35.

²²⁰ "Afghanistan," *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²²¹ Russell D. Howard, *Cultural and Linguistic Skills Acquisition for Special Forces: Necessity, Acceleration, and Potential Alternatives*, MacDill AFB, Florida: Joint Special Operations University, December 2011. https://jsou.socom.mil/JSOU_Publications/11-6_Final.PDF (accessed March 1, 2013), 3-4.

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

In January 2013, after the Malian government requested assistance in retaking northern Mali, French forces launched Operation Serval.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.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.²²⁷ There are unofficial reports of British²²⁸ and U.S. Special Forces training troops in Mali as well.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.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.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.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.

²²² Scott Stewart, "Mali Besieged by Fighters Fleeing Libya | Stratfor," Stratfor | Global Intelligence News & Analysis | Geopolitical News.

<http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/mali-besieged-fighters-fleeing-libya> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²²³ "Mali," *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ "Mali and France 'push back Islamists'," BBC News. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20991723> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ "Mali conflict: French 'fighting Islamists in Diabaly'," BBC News. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21038856> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²²⁸ Nick Hopkins, "UK special forces active in Mali," *The Guardian*.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2013/jan/22/uk-special-forces-active-mali> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²²⁹ Jack Murphy, "Exclusive: SOF Trains Spec Ops in Mali," SOFREP | THE Special Operations Forces Situation Report. <http://sofrep.com/17038/training->

[malian-special-operations-soldiers/](#) (accessed March 23, 2013).

²³⁰ "Malian forces battle Tuareg rebels," News24.

<http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/Malian-forces-battle-Tuareg-rebels-20120304> (accessed March 23, 2013).

²³¹ Weisgerber, "U.S. Special Ops to Grow as DoD Budget Shrinks."

²³² Ibid.

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