

Britain makes its own military push into Africa

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Britain is to send at least 350 military personnel to Mali and West Africa in a direct challenge to French efforts to dominate the region.

This comes just days after Prime Minister David Cameron warned that the growth of Islamic extremism in the area constituted a “generational struggle”, drawing parallels with the conflict in Afghanistan, and implying decades of war.

Shortly after the troop deployment announcement, Cameron left to visit Algeria, Libya and Liberia.

Britain is making a concerted push to stake its claim to the rich mineral and energy resources of North Africa and the Sahel, the region stretching across the Sahara Desert, as part of the intensifying struggle of all the major powers to dominate the region.

France and the UK are both seeking to exploit the gap left by Washington’s pre-occupation with its overstretched neo-colonial ventures in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, and potentially in Syria and Iran. But in so doing, they threaten to reignite old rivalries and tensions between the former colonial powers as well as new ones with the US, China and Russia. These tensions have become particularly acute now that the impoverished but resource-rich Sahel is playing a key role in supplying Europe’s energy needs.

Defence Secretary Philip Hammond told Parliament on Tuesday that 200 troops, to be based in Nigeria or Ghana, would help train local forces for their role in Mali after France had driven the Islamist rebels from their strongholds in the north of the country. British troops would not be deployed before there was protection in place for them, implying the need for additional forces.

He added that 40 troops would take part in a European Union training mission in Mali, a further 70 would fly the Sentinel spy aircraft from Senegal for

surveillance and intelligence missions, while another 20 would operate the C-17 military transport aircraft to transport French and African forces. Britain is also expected to send a ferry to help France move troops and equipment to Africa.

There are already about 90 military personnel operating transport and surveillance flights out of Dakar, the Senegalese capital.

In response to criticisms from MPs that Britain was being dragged into a wider conflict, Hammond insisted that there had been and there would be no “mission creep”. But Ministry of Defence officials have admitted the number of troops is likely to increase.

The prime minister’s office said that Britain’s backing for the French operation flowed from the 2010 Lancaster House agreement, whereby the two countries agreed to support each other militarily. Britain had apparently offered to establish a joint logistic headquarters to organise the transport of French troops and equipment in Mali. But Paris saw this for what it was, an attempt by London to gain a toehold in France’s former colony, and turned down the offer.

Only a week ago, Cameron had insisted that there would be “no boots on the ground” in Mali. British troops would support France with transport but play no combat role.

Cameron has also signalled that the defence cuts of the last few years will be reversed, with increases for the armed forces above the rate of inflation from 2015, while cuts in health, education, social insurance and other vital services continue. Britain is set to spend £160 billion over the next 10 years on new vehicles and kit for the armed forces, with £35.8 billion for submarines, including the replacement for the Trident nuclear system, £18.5 billion on warplanes and drones, and £17.4 billion for ships and new aircraft carriers.

The National Audit Office has already warned that these costs, like the rest of Britain's arms procurement, are likely to be far higher.

Cameron followed the announcement on Mali with a visit to Algeria, another former French colony, shelving a planned trip to Ghana to do so, to discuss security in the region. Algeria, which regards itself as the natural leader in the region, perceives France, Morocco (as a French ally), Libya and the European Union (as French dominated) as threats to its position. Just how inflammatory this is in French eyes can be gauged by the fact that this was the first visit by a British Prime Minister since Algeria became independent in 1962.

Cameron was accompanied by Sir Kim Darroch, national security adviser, and Lord Risby, appointed as trade envoy, a post created last November. His visit took place less than two weeks after the Algerian army stormed the gas production plant at In Amenas, jointly operated by BP, Statoil, and Sonatrach, in a bungled attempt to free the workers, mainly foreigners, seized by armed Islamists demanding a prisoner release and an end to France's operations in neighbouring Mali. Thirty-eight civilians, including six Britons, and 29 Islamists were killed in the army's rescue operation.

After meeting with his Algerian counterpart, Abdelmalek Sellal, Cameron announced that the two countries had agreed a security partnership, including cooperation on border and aviation security, as well as joint action on trade, investment and education. They would look more broadly at security threats in North Africa and the Sahel, stretching across the Sahara Desert.

Britain had, he said, invited Algeria to take part in a joint contingency planning exercise to share experience in responding to crisis situations. This was a reference to Algeria's failure to inform Britain about its plan to free the hostages in January or to accept Britain's offer of help. London had sent a combat force to assist.

Like Tony Blair's now infamous deal with Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, Cameron has no compunction in striking up a relationship with one of the most brutal regimes in the region. During the 1990s, Algeria nullified an election that would have brought an Islamist government to power and put down an Islamist insurgency at a cost of more than 200,000 lives.

At stake are Britain's corporate and strategic interests in Algeria and the Sahara. Algeria has the 10th largest

natural gas reserves in the world, is also the 10th biggest producer of natural gas, and will play a key role in the European Union's plans to bring Nigerian gas via a pipeline to Europe. Not incidentally, it also has the largest military budget in Africa, \$8.6 billion in 2011.

The BP stake in the gas plant at In Amenas in southern Algeria is one of a number of such facilities that now supply 5 percent of Britain's gas needs and employ about 450 Britons. This amount is set to increase as Britain's North Sea supplies continue to dwindle. Bilateral trade between the two countries nearly doubled to \$2 billion in 2011. Britain signed a defence agreement with Algeria in 2009, established a dedicated British-Algerian Business Council in 2010 and sent Foreign Secretary William Hague to Algiers in 2011.

Cameron also made a surprise visit to Tripoli, the Libyan capital, to discuss "security". Britain finds itself increasingly shut out of Libya, with Britons being warned to stay away from Tripoli and Benghazi, where the uprising against the Gaddafi regime began. Armed Islamists are threatening Britain's commercial interests from bases in Libya. Britain is using "security" as a pretext for the direct involvement of its armed forces as a new "Scramble for Africa" gets under way.



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