

US carries out first drone strike in southern Libya

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Over the weekend, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) conducted its first ever drone strike against Al-Qaeda militants in southern Libya, killing two in the southern village of Ubari. The attack marks a new stage in the expansion of the American military offensive in Libya and northern Africa since the Trump administration took office. Notably, the strike was not accompanied by a public acknowledgement from AFRICOM.

While officials did not disclose the drone's base of operations, AFRICOM has been preparing for a massive escalation of armed drone flights conducted across the African continent from its recently constructed base in neighboring Niger, at Agadez.

The strike occurred in an extremely remote region of Libya, located some 435 miles south of Tripoli and about 250 miles from the border with Algeria. The region is known as a haven for Islamist militants who have spilled into Libya and south into the Sahel since the 2011 US-NATO bombardment of the country.

Geographically, the area around Ubari is roughly equidistant to the borders of the neighboring countries of Algeria, Chad, and Niger, and has long functioned as a thoroughfare for the smuggling of weapons, drugs, and immigrants traversing the lawless, vast expanse of desert of the Sahara comprising the countries of Libya, Niger, Chad, Algeria, and flowing through to Mali.

Following the international outcry provoked by the killing of four Green Berets in an ambush last October in Niger, which exposed the advanced nature of American military operations in West Africa, AFRICOM has sought to keep secret subsequent operations, and did not provide a press release for the strike.

Only after Libyan media reported that the strike targeted a house frequented by foreigners, and

published pictures taken in the aftermath of the strike which showed a mutilated corpse laying in the rubble of a house, with shrapnel-ridden vehicles nearby, did the deadly operation come to the attention of Western media.

When requested by the *New York Times* to provide a statement on the strike, AFRICOM gave a terse and brief reply, declaring that the strike targeted militants with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb (AQIM), and had been conducted in coordination with the US-backed Unity government in Tripoli, and that two militants were killed. "At this time, we assess no civilians were killed in this strike," Robyn Mack, a spokesperson for AFRICOM, told the *Times*.

Speaking to the stakes at play in the US drone strike, Deborah K. Jones, the US Ambassador to Libya for the 2013-2015 period under the Obama administration, told the *New York Times* that the attack essentially constitutes an escalation of the US military's offensive, "This appears to be the continuation of expanding AFRICOM activity in Libya's ungoverned areas."

Luke Hartig, a former senior director for counter-terrorism at the National Security Council during the Obama administration, told the *Times*, "Beginning a concerted strike campaign against AQIM or other AQ elements in the Sahel, akin to what we are doing in Yemen and Somalia, would mark a significant expansion of our counter-terrorism efforts."

The strike marks the first time the US has openly targeted the Al-Qaeda-affiliated militants in Libya, which were armed and backed by the Obama administration during the US-NATO bombardment in 2011 that culminated in the removal and assassination of Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi.

In 2016, the US conducted over 500 air strikes against ISIS militants in the coastal city of Sirte, an

area which comprises Libya's oil crescent along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where much of the country's oil infrastructure is located.

Taking advantage of the chaos brought to the country after the US-backed NATO offensive that destroyed much of Libya, ISIS militants had taken control of the Gaddafi-era state-owned oil company, leaving the militia with full command of the terminals overseeing the transport of oil to Europe.

The escalation of the AFRICOM offensive in the country comes amid the complete destruction of Libyan society after the 2011 regime change operation left the country an apocalyptic wasteland split between competing armed factions. Much of the country's critical infrastructure was destroyed by US and NATO airstrikes, with entire cities reduced to rubble. Vital services such as water, sewage treatment and electricity have not yet been fully restored in many areas.

Libya is home to the world's largest oil deposits, from which the majority of Libyans see no economic benefit. According to World Bank figures, 40 per cent of the population of 6.4 million lives below the poverty line, but the figure is certainly vastly understated, as an accurate accounting cannot be conducted due to ongoing conflict in the country.

Last year it was revealed by Amnesty International that the European Union was behind the development and funding of a vast network of prison camps in Libya, seeking to halt the flow of refugees fleeing to Europe.

The report documented that nearly 500,000 refugees from various countries in Africa languish in these camps. The detainees' conditions in these camps are utterly barbaric, and refugees have experienced torture, rape, beatings, and even being sold into slavery.

In overseeing the upending of Libyan society, Washington under the Trump administration is escalating the American military offensive in the region in a desperate attempt to reestablish its dominance over a region with vast oil wealth.

The latest drone strike comes amid a broader US military offensive in West Africa, for which the Trump administration issued new rules of engagement last year, which essentially constitute the granting of broad authority to US forces in conducting open-ended warfare on the continent.

The expansion of the conflict in Libya coincides with

the escalated US offensives conducted in Somalia, with a vast increase in drone strikes in the country over previous years, as well as the offensive role US special forces have taken in Niger, where AFRICOM has dropped all pretense to its claimed role of merely providing training and logistics to Nigerien troops, and now lead their Nigerien counterparts in waging all-out war.



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