

# Washington seeks permanent deployment of special forces brigade to Africa

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Republican Senator James Inhofe of the Senate Armed Services Committee last week sent a letter to Secretary of the Army Mark Esper outlining a proposal that would constitute an increase in troop levels deployed under AFRICOM, as well as broadening the American military's footprint across Africa.

In his letter, Inhofe requested the Army secretary give his views regarding the assignment to AFRICOM of one of the six new Security Forces Assistant Brigades (SFAB). The special brigade, if deployed, would provide an additional 500 troops on a permanent basis for AFRICOM.

Inhofe wrote, "As you know, AFRICOM does not have any assigned forces, but must compete for allocated forces within the Department of Defense's global force management process. The Army has allocated a Brigade Combat Team (BCT) to AFRICOM in the recent past as part of the Regionally Aligned Forces (RAF) program. These operations were a success for our African nation partners and built strategic partnerships for the United States. However, they also negatively affected the allocated BCT's readiness, especially for core missions such as full spectrum combat operations."

The SFAB were officially introduced last year with the first of six brigades activated. According to the Pentagon, the new units were "created in order to train, advise, assist, enable and accompany host nation conventional forces in infantry, armor, cavalry, engineer, artillery and combined arms warfare."

According to the US Army website, the Pentagon envisions the SFAB as "specifically built to achieve the Army's vision of enabling combatant commanders to carry out theater security objectives through partnered and allied indigenous security forces for decades to come."

The drive to increase the American military's presence in Africa comes after last year's ambush killing of four Green Berets in Niger while conducting a combat mission with their Nigerien counterparts. Highlighting the predatory aim of AFRICOM's presence in the region is the Niger defense minister's admission that the US forces "wage war when necessary."

The plan to expand AFRICOM follows an already amplified presence across the continent, with an estimated 6,000 US special forces and other military personnel on the ground in nearly every country in Africa.

AFRICOM was established in 2007 by the Bush administration to oversee and develop military operations on the resource-rich continent. In the beginning, the command was little more than an appendage run under Central Command (CENTCOM) from its headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany. Its exponential expansion today into every corner of Africa is a significant manifestation of Washington's far-reaching drive to secure US economic dominance over Africa's vast resources and block the advance of its economic rivals, foremost China.

The Trump administration has overseen a significant rise in drone strikes in Somalia, conducting 35 drone strikes in 2017. In comparison, there were 13 strikes conducted in 2016, and five in 2015. As the WWSW has reported, 2018 is on pace to surpass all previous years combined for drone strikes in the country.

Additionally, the Trump administration issued new rules of engagement for US military forces, essentially granting free rein for commanders to carry out open-ended warfare. The Pentagon has deployed another 500 troops to Somalia.

Notably, the US military has opened a new drone

base in Agadez, Niger, which the Pentagon projects will give it the ability to carry out drone strikes and surveillance throughout Western and Northern Africa.

Major General Marcus Hicks, the Chief of Staff for US Special Operations Command, spoke to the *Washington Post* amid the annual Flintlock military exercise currently being held in Niger. Hicks reiterated the broad scope of the American military's aim in Africa, saying, "We're not reducing our footprint or tempo [in Africa]."

Flintlock is a counterterrorism exercise organized by AFRICOM, with the participation of several African nations, since 2005. Participating countries (both past and present) include, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Canada, Tunisia, Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States.

Naming the "rise of Islamic extremism" as the pretext for AFRICOM's broadening mission, Hicks told the *Post*, "I believe al-Qaida has a more disciplined approach to developing infrastructure across Africa, north Africa, the Sahel. They are taking a patient approach to gaining ground in influence over organizations that are already there and co-opting local and regional grievances and turning it to their own devices."

In fact, the rise of Islamic militants, spilling into the Sahel and West Africa, is largely the consequence of Washington's intervention into Libya.

From the beginning of the campaign for regime change in Libya, Washington enlisted Islamic militants affiliated or linked to Al-Qaeda to carry out its dirty work in removing Gaddafi.

Now, in the aftermath of the bombardment of Libya by NATO air strikes in 2011 that led to the complete upending of Libyan society, from which it has yet to recover, the former US-backed fighters spilled forth out of Libya and down into West Africa.

The militarization of the continent comes amid a rise in strikes and demonstrations across Africa. Doctors and teachers in Algeria, Kenya, Togo and Nigeria have been carrying out protests and strikes, in many cases completely shutting down schools, universities, and hospitals.

In the final analysis, AFRICOM's escalation and expansion complements Washington's utilization of its

massive military power to counter waning US economic and political influence in Africa and neutralize China's rising economic influence on the continent. Beijing's recent opening of a naval base in Djibouti, five miles from the joint US-France Camp Lemonnier base, is of particular concern to Washington's strategists.



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