December 2017

Bad Idea: Armed Drones in West Africa

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It's unofficial: "The government of Niger has approved the use of armed American drones." Though this Reuters report is not a statement of American policy, it follows an NBC News report that American policymakers were indeed considering the use of airborne "lethal force" in the western Sahel, a semi-arid strip of land bordering the Sahara Desert. The Department of Defense (DoD)'s expansion of an airfield in central Niger and the Nigerien Minister of Defense's public comments corroborate the story: the U.S. plans to add remotely piloted airstrikes to its policy approach in West Africa.

It is a bad idea whose time has come. After the Western interventions in Libya and Mali, a new generation of violent extremist organizations linked to al Qaeda and the Islamic State grew more capable and spread across the Maghreb-Sahel region, alarming European allies and driving up demand for intelligence platforms and the forces to operate and maintain them. The French have already announced their intentions to deploy armed Reapers to their base in Niamey, Niger's capital, by 2020.[1] Add to that the vulnerabilities to scattered U.S. personnel in the region exposed by the October ambush on U.S. special operators and an administration inclined toward giving Combatant Commanders the tools they request, and it was all but inevitable that we would reach this point.

Operationally, armed remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs) offer precision targeting at reduced risk to U.S. personnel. Strategically, they increase pressure on armed groups, eliminating leadership and rank-and-file and driving organizational chaos. But to believe that armed RPAs have a uniform effect on terrorist groups around the globe—and present uniform, acceptable risks to CT and other security policies—is to dismiss the

[1] For a comprehensive accounting of French operations in West Africa, see Christopher Griffin (2016), "Operation Barkhane and Boko Haram: French Counterterrorism and Military Cooperation in the Sahel." Small Wars and Insurgencies, 27:5, 896-913.

importance of context. To accept the value of armed RPA operations in West Africa, therefore, we must validate a series of assumptions.

First, we must have confidence that drone attacks will degrade West Africa's terrorist groups in an operational and/or strategic sense. Next, given the variety of groups in the region, we must believe that we have a reasonable process in place for prioritizing strike targeting among them. We must also believe that targeted Islamist groups in the Sahel and Maghreb really do present a clear threat to American national security interests such that escalating from African (and French) CT leadership to unilateral U.S. lethal operations is required—and, as a corollary, that unilateral U.S. operations will not radicalize the populations living under RPA flight paths. Finally, we must believe that there are either no negative political externalities to the use of drones or that those costs are outweighed by the preceding assumed operational and strategic benefits.

Yet none of these assumptions can be validated for West Africa by available evidence. To examine the political factors first, many of the governments in the region rest on tenuous political foundations in which unilateral U.S. military strikes could generate cracks. Public trust in national security services varies widely across the region, and the relationship between government credibility and foreign intervention in the security environment is poorly understood. Regardless, increased Western military presence for the purpose of *lethal* operations remains a contentious policy among West African populations whose faith in the legitimacy of their governments is already weak.

It is also far from clear that any of the terrorist groups in West Africa are either in a position to threaten Western targets outside of their region or are committed to doing so. Outside their grandiose rhetoric, organizations like Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM, the umbrella group uniting various al Qaeda affiliates) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) have yet to demonstrate an ability to stray much beyond their narrow operational areas in remote border regions. It is far more likely that the al Qaeda and Islamic State brands provide them with an appearance of power and extra-regional relevance disproportionate to their actual operational reach and numbers. Emphasizing these groups' pan-Islamist

affiliations also ignores their more immediate, non-ideological, self-enrichment goals.[2] In short, it is unclear whether these groups have graduated from transnational challenges to genuine enemies of the American state.

Even if U.S. strikes could remove ISGS from the battlefield, a variety of other groups would gladly claim their territory, recruits, and cash flow—and perhaps ISIS support. Could the U.S. develop a process to prioritize among an ever-changing array of targets and sustain a tempo of operations where all groups were meaningfully degraded at the same rates, so as not to provide opportunity space for one at the expense of others? Or would the U.S. address each group serially? This line of inquiry begs another question: Would U.S. strikes complement a comprehensive approach to defeating these groups, or are they expected to degrade ISGS/AQIM/JNIM/ et al operational capabilities independently? And what organizational changes in militant groups on the ground might such single-source pressure instigate?

If we use counterterrorism in Somalia as a guide, experience shows that persistent drone strikes have not ended terrorist insurgent activity, but merely have suppressed it to a level where the government survives even though the population continues to suffer from terrorist attacks. This is hardly a solution to terrorism, nor even a kind of homeostasis. It is a policy requiring unending American military operations. Given the risks to regional political stability and the marginal operational returns, introducing armed RPAs to West Africa would be unlikely to generate net benefits to the counterterrorism fight.

None of this is intended to argue that the U.S. should abandon CT efforts in West Africa. But it should not make its goals harder to attain, either. It is reasonable for the U.S. to reserve the right to introduce armed platforms—manned or unmanned—on a temporary basis in extremis. And maintaining an ISR investment in the region to monitor the status of terrorist groups is a wise insurance policy for ourselves and our regional partners. But a semi-permanent expeditionary presence for armed RPAs in West Africa with a routine strike operational tempo would likely destabilize regional politics, reorder militant groups without defeating them, and generate a perpetual demand for American military operations against a foe that has not demonstrated a strategic threat to U.S. interests.

[2] Wolfram Lacher, "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," in eds. Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars (2013), Perilous Desert: Insecurity in the Sahara. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

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