



Vast, trackless, and ungoverned, Africa's sprawling desert is now a magnet for terrorists.

# SWAMP OF TERROR



*Malian infantrymen undergo desert training under the watchful eye of the American military member on the hill.*

AP photo by Ben Curtis



# TERROR IN THE SAHARA

By Stewart M. Powell

**W**HERE the deadly Madrid train bombings plotted by Muslim terrorists in the Sahara? The answer, quite probably, is yes. The Moroccan daily *Al-Ahdath Al-Maghribia* has reported that those March 11 attacks were conceived and launched from the “terrorism triangle,” a desolate zone encompassing parts of Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, and Mali.

According to the newspaper, Moroccan intelligence agencies tracked the movements of the terror bombers to what was described as an “al Qaeda rear base” in the Sahara.

That is not the only worrisome sign that has emerged in the past few months from the world’s largest wasteland.

- According to US military officials, al Qaeda has sent terrorists from Saharan hideouts to join the anti-US jihad in Iraq.

- Islamic militants in Algeria’s swath of the Sahara used \$6 million in kidnap ransoms to recruit fresh jihadists, buy heavy weapons, and acquire high-tech equipment.

- Libya recently discovered a desert operations camp used by a hard-line Algerian Islamic militant group linked to al Qaeda.

There is a new front in America’s global war on terrorism, US officials say. Across the broad Sahara—a desolate expanse of sand and rock covering 3.3 million square miles—al Qaeda and its terrorist affiliates are setting up shop, taking advantage of the lawless and trackless badlands stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

Unless checked, the terrorist infes-

tation could turn parts of Africa into launchpads for tomorrow’s murderous outrages.

Some believe the arid, impoverished region could succeed Afghanistan as the world’s No. 1 haven for fanatic Islamic militants. Today, the Sahara region is believed to be home for thousands of the 30,000 or so jihadists who passed through Osama bin Laden’s Afghan training camps in the 1990s.

American military forces dismantled the Afghan terror facilities after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in the US. Some of the uprooted al Qaeda fighters are believed to have fled to familiar Muslim outposts in Africa, where they have resumed their activities.

A spokesman for US European Command, whose area of operations includes large parts of Africa, said, “There are clear indications that Muslim extremists from the Middle East and Afghanistan have moved into these massive open spaces.”

## A New Haven

For Muslim terrorists, the Sahara is an extremely useful base of operations. Bin Laden himself found sanctuary in Sudan from 1991 until he departed for Afghanistan in 1996.

One major attraction: With more than a dozen nations with 300 million Muslim faithful, most of them in the Sahara, one finds an abundance of fundamentalist Islamic passion.

William Langewiesche, a noted travel writer, spent weeks exploring the Sahara and came back concerned. “The large, vigorous fundamentalist movement,” he wrote, “has become



**An American Army Special Forces member works with African soldiers near Timbuktu. Already, African troops have faced terrorist forces in combat.**

the dominant political factor in the Sahara.”

And Langewiesche wrote those lines in 1991.

In this region, one finds all sorts of pathologies—arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and free movement of transnational criminals, according to EUCOM. The region is filled with little-patrolled desert crossings and hideouts. It has weak airport security, lax government control, and endemic corruption. Illegal commerce of all kinds—in vehicles, cigarettes, arms, and other goods—has been around for decades.

Most importantly, the Sahara is vast—3,000 miles across, making it as large as the United States. With Africa’s harshest and least populated terrain, and with a nearly total lack of communications, the Sahara mostly defies national government authority. African armies, relatively small and poorly equipped, have difficulty monitoring the huge territories they are supposed to control, say US military officers.

Such “ungoverned areas” are becoming the “melting pots for the disenfranchised of the world—terrorist breeding grounds,” warns Marine Corps Gen. James L. Jones, the NATO commander who heads US European Command.

“We need to drain the swamp,” adds Air Force Gen. Charles F. Wald, deputy commander of EUCOM. “The United States learned a lesson in Afghanistan—you don’t let things go.”

These facts have elevated Africa’s

place in US foreign policy calculations. Once a humanitarian concern only, it now enjoys a strategic place in Washington’s plans. It has a prominent place in the “definition of vital US national interests,” observes a recent report to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell by the Africa Policy Advisory Panel.

### **Military Clashes**

The stakes are high. Africa-based al Qaeda operatives and allies use remote reaches of the Sahara and Horn of Africa to train fresh recruits. The Sahara’s ancient caravan routes serve as unpoliced byways for international

terrorists trying to reach the Mediterranean and slip undetected into Western Europe or the Middle East.

The transformation of the Sahara already has led to sharp military clashes between terrorists and local fighters.

In Algeria, an al Qaeda lieutenant—Emad Abdelwahid Ahmed Alwan—was killed by Algerian forces in a gun battle in September 2002 about 270 miles east of Algiers. Authorities said Alwan had met with Algerian-based Salafists and was coordinating al Qaeda-backed operations across North Africa.

In June, 3,000 Algerian troops tracked down and raided a remote camp used by the 4,000-strong Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, an al Qaeda-linked terrorist group that killed 43 Algerian soldiers and kidnapped 32 European tourists in 2003. The raid by Algerian forces killed the leader, Nabil Sahraoui, who had forged ties with al Qaeda, and three of his lieutenants.

In March, the forces of Mali drove paratrooper-turned-terrorist Amari Saifi across the Sahara to Niger and into Chad, where he and nine other suspected terrorists were captured by Chadian rebels. The rebels opened negotiations with Algeria, France, Germany, Niger, and the US for his handover.

In February, Algerian forces intercepted a convoy carrying weapons north from Mali. Algerian officials



**Nigerian troops patrol near a military base in the Sahara Desert. The small size of the typical African national army makes it difficult for its forces to monitor effectively the huge areas nominally under their control.**



**A USAF aircrew member checks over his MH-53 helicopter at a former French Foreign Legion base near Djibouti, on Africa's east coast. US Central Command has been intercepting terrorists fleeing Afghanistan.**

say the cargo contained mortar launchers, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and surface-to-air missiles.

American officials say that no US troops have become directly engaged in the fighting. However, local combat operations have been supported by the United States, which has provided communications, intelligence, and reconnaissance support.

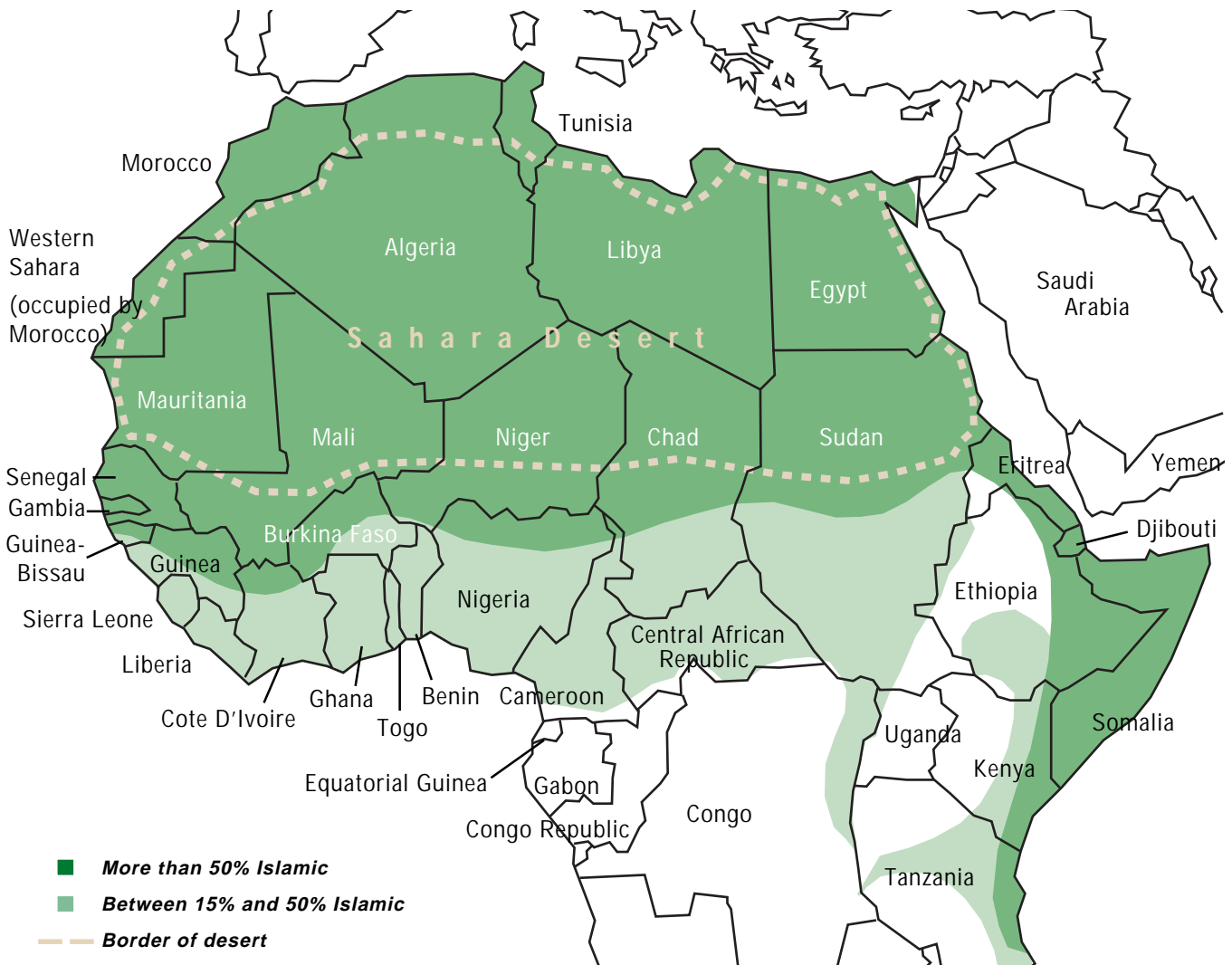
The Voice of America reported in March that the US military delivered food, medical supplies, and other assistance to Chad to support government troops battling suspected terrorists linked to al Qaeda.

US officials say a Navy P-3 Orion reconnaissance aircraft played a key role in guiding troops in Chad to a remote area in the country's far north, close to the border with Niger.

No one denies, however, that US

## The New Front in the War on Terrorism

**Impoverished areas of Africa with large Muslim populations have become a haven for radical Islamists.**





**An Air Force MH-53 Pave Low SOF helicopter takes off from Djibouti. EUCOM hopes to set up numerous standby bases in Africa. They would be activated periodically to train African forces.**

forces are on the ground in Saharan nations. Washington has dispatched special operations forces teams to train local forces and sometimes patrol with them. The SOF teams also provide basic gear such as radios, GPS receivers, and vehicles.

In Timbuktu, Mali, for example, US Army soldiers of 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), based in Stuttgart, Germany, are training Malian soldiers deployed on the fringe of the Sahara.

SOF training focuses on mobility, communications, land navigation, and small unit tactics in order to enhance border capabilities throughout the region.

### Expanded Training

US leaders are expanding military training and assistance for local armed forces in those African nations thought to be most vulnerable to terrorist infestation.

The Bush Administration has launched the so-called Pan-Sahel Initiative. It will provide \$7.75 million for US military training this year for the armed forces in the four West African nations of Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Chad.

The Pentagon wants \$125 million over five years to permit special operations forces to build surrogate anti-terrorist forces and provide training to Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, where threats by Islamic terrorists have been growing.

The United States also is fostering

pan-Saharan defense cooperation. In March, for example, EUCOM hosted the first meeting of defense chiefs from eight African nations—Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, and Tunisia. At this meeting, recalls Wald, the defense chiefs of neighboring Niger and Chad met face-to-face for the first time.

Senior US military officers consider these kinds of personal relationships to be essential for the gathering and sharing of intelligence on terrorist activities.

Apart from training activities, the United States has taken some tentative steps toward building a US presence. EUCOM plans to establish a half-dozen or so bare-bones facilities in various African nations. The on-call bases would be activated periodically to train local forces.

Some of these would be at airports. Others would be located deep in the outback of African nations. Wald cites the example of US-built facilities at Entebbe airport in Uganda, where the on-call facilities are available as needed.

The US continues to seek permanent sites. Wald has visited the 371-square-mile island nation of Sao Tome in the Gulf of Guinea, 120 miles off the coast of Gabon on Africa's west coast. He hopes to build relationships

that one day might permit US forces to use the tiny island in crises, much as they use the British-owned Indian Ocean atoll of Diego Garcia.

"I can see the United States potentially having a forward operating location in Sao Tome," Wald said in 2003, relishing the possibilities in the former Portuguese protectorate.

Jones says carrier battle groups or Marine contingents that routinely patrol the Mediterranean Sea on six-month rotations may soon be devoting half of their deployment times to patrols, training, and goodwill visits along Africa's west coast.

### In the Horn

Three thousand miles away, on Africa's east coast, US forces have taken up positions on a dusty, 88-acre base in Djibouti, formerly used by the French Foreign Legion. It is part of US Central Command's effort to intercept al Qaeda operatives fleeing Afghanistan for East Africa.

Apart from military operations, the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa also has engaged in civil affairs operations designed to strengthen the ability of local governments in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Sudan to improve the lives of citizens to help forestall inroads by Islamic fundamentalist recruiters.

US soldiers earlier this year arrived in a remote area of Ethiopia, where they have set up a bare, forward operating base.

Though the American presence is small and discreet, all signs are that US forces are in the Sahara to stay. Senior American officers seem resigned to the need to operate there for the indefinite future.

The rationale is summed up clearly by Lt. Gen. Wallace C. Gregson Jr., commander of Marine Corps forces in the Pacific, which support the Marine-led JTF in Djibouti.

"Trouble comes from ungoverned places," notes Gregson. "[The] 9/11 [attacks] showed us how a guy sitting in a cave with access to worldwide transportation and worldwide financial networks could take out the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in a single morning. It used to take nations to do that much killing." ■

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