

**General Stephen J. Townsend  
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**Defense Writers Group  
Project for Media and National Security  
George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs**

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**Moderator:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to this Defense Writers Group with General Stephen Townsend, Commander of US Africa Command. This is actually one of our largest turnouts ever, so it shows the great interest in the topic and of course the convenience of meeting on Zoom from time to time.

Our ground rules, as always, this conversation is on the record, but there is no rebroadcast of either audio or video. As is our custom, I'll ask the first question and then I'll go to the floor. About a half dozen of you emailed me in advance to get on the questioners list. If you do want to ask a question you can drop me a note in the direct chat.

With that, General, we are honored by your presence. Thank you so much for joining us today.

**General Townsend:** Thanks, Thom, it's great to be here with all of you. And let me just say to the whole group, I really actually appreciate what you're all doing out there. I actually believe in the importance of a free press and a free society and the ability to shine a spotlight on all that we're doing, even while you're filing your fingernails.

**Moderator:** Well General, that's certainly the purpose of the Defense Writers Group and we certainly appreciate your engagement with us.

My first question, sir, is a two-parter, if I could. As you near the end of what's been a very dynamic tour as Commander, what do you see as the most significant accomplishments the command has made working with African partners to help build security and stability and improve US strategic interests there?

Part B is the other end of the telescope. As you pass off command, what do you see as the most significant challenges, both legacy threats and new ones, that will be facing the incoming commander?

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**General Townsend:** I'm going to take the liberty of answering that in reverse order. I'm going to address the challenges first.

The challenges have been and will continue to be first, strategic competitors. China is acting in a very whole of government way, leaving with development and economic measures on the continent. They are proceeding I think to increase their access and influence on the continent, and they have a desire, we know this for a fact, a desire to establish more military bases on the continent.

Russia is acting in a more I think self-interested exploitative and extractive way. Their main action arm on the continent besides the foreign ministry this last week, their main action arm has been the Russian mercenary group Wagner who no one should be dissuaded by the Kremlin's propaganda otherwise. The Kremlin directs the broad action of Wagner. Not day to day certainly, but Prigozhin's doing what Putin wants him to do in Wagner.

That's challenge number one.

Challenge number two is VEOs. Some of the most lethal terrorists on the planet are now in Africa. They were once in Iraq and Syria and Afghanistan. I think the central focus of terrorism in the world today is on the African continent. Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Climate change and the environment. Whether someone is a believer in climate change or not, the environment is definitely affecting lives in Africa. Drought, famine, desertification, all of these things I think will continue to be challenges that are just tough to accomplish.

Then I would say probably fourth was making sure we have the right level of attention and engagement and sustained resourcing from our own capital in Washington for Africa. We've got to elevate that every now and then. I think we've had three defense reviews in about four years and efforts to move our headquarters out of Europe.

On the flip side of that, the accomplishments. One, I would say we've protected US interests in Africa during my three years in

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command and we've prevented strategic distractions. What do I mean by that? We've kept events in Africa from derailing our primary security focus on China as our pacing threat and Russia as our acute or near-term threat. We've been able to focus on those threats because we haven't had to focus on Africa.

We rescued an American citizen hostage, Philip Walton. That's something I feel pretty good about. We took him back from his violent extremist captors and returned him to his family.

We conducted a very disciplined Somalia drawdown as we were directed to do at the end of the last administration, on very short notice. We assembled the task force and were able to extract all of our equipment and personnel without loss while in contact with a very determined enemy. I'm pretty proud of that. On the flip side, I'm proud that we've been able to work and our [inaudible] to put them back.

Then I think last, we have conveyed I think successfully to our civilian leadership both on Capital Hill and in the Pentagon and in the White House the importance of Africa to American security. We've retained resources that have been challenged over the last couple of years, and we wound up keeping AFRICOM in Germany. Which I'm also pleased with that.

That's my answer.

**Moderator:** Great, General. It's a very thorough response. I appreciate your time.

Our first question from the floor is Meghann Myers of Military Times.

**DWG:** You mentioned the discussion about moving headquarters out of Germany. Where is that now and what do you think the future is for US military specifically present in Africa? Does that look like more rotations? Does that look like basing? Is that more exercises? Where do you see that going?

**General Townsend:** That's been put to rest fairly early in the current administration's tenure. They told us to stop worrying about where our headquarters was going to be and stay in Europe and stay here. In fact, whether it was originally where we had to go or where we wanted to go, after about three formal reviews over the history of our command -- we're coming up on our 14<sup>th</sup>

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birthday 1 October. Over those three reviews, we have come to the same conclusion each time. Europe is a great place to be, and if you're in Europe, Germany's a good place to be. But Europe is a very smart place to be for our command and I would make that recommendation back to our leaders in Washington if this question, and it probably will come up. It seems like it comes up every three or four years.

On the second part of your question, what's it mean for US military on the continent? I would say you're not going to see a very significant change we're still in what the department refers to as an economy of force theater, also in the current lexicon a posture-limited theater, which means we're still not going to get very many resources. And I don't actually think we need a lot of resources to do our job, to protect America's interests here in Africa and advance our objectives.

So I think what you'll see is you'll see continued engagement heavily in East Africa because of the threat from al-Qaeda's arm there, al-Shabaab. And you'll see continued possibly slightly enhanced engagement in West Africa, even as all our partners are recalibrating there. We've got the emergence of coups there, coup governments -- Somali, Burkina Faso, Guinea are examples. We have the emergence of the Russian mercenary Wagner in Mali. And we have terrorism continuing to advance there. So because of all these things, all of our partners -- African and international partners -- are recalibrating. We are too. I think we'll stay the course there I think we'll probably keep about the same number of troops engaged there. We're going to try to enhance and improve the way we're engaging with all of our partners there.

**DWG:** How do you square this assessment that Africa is sort of the base for violent extremism right now with the constraints that you guys are not a budget priority?

**General Townsend:** Great question. Violent extremists are an identified top five threat in the National Defense Strategy. As you probably know or the audience knows, it's China first, then Russia, then Iran and North Korea, then violent extremists, in that order. So we're tier five or a five priority threat and I think our job is to provide indications and warnings and disrupt those threats so they don't become a problem to Western interests or US interests globally and in the homeland. So I think we have the resources about right to do that.

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Would I like to have more resources to do that? Absolutely. And my leaders in Washington know that. But I think we have the resources we need about right, the number of resources we need to do the job.

**Moderator:** Next question is Eric Schmitt of the New York Times.

**DWG:** Good morning, General. Thanks.

You've dealt with an array of partner forces, both as AFRICOM Commander and as OIR Commander, ranging from the rise in assist to all the way up to 127 Echo. I'm wondering as you look forward and you look at the threats, not just on the continent, but as you look back to some of your previous assignments in the Middle East, which of those partner type forces are going to be the most useful in fulfilling US national security interests in the coming years.

**General Townsend:** I'll be very straightforward here and I'll say this. The best partner force I have worked with in 40 years were the Syrian Democratic Forces in Northern Syria. That force is your dream partner. I know there are others on the planet, some of whom that I haven't worked with, but that's a great partner. They took the training we gave them, they took the equipment we gave them, they gave us immediate return on investment. They went off and fought the enemy. They asked for the help they needed not help with everything. And they eventually took on tasks from us.

For example, when we started out we were doing their basic training and all their advanced combat training. After at awhile they said hey, we can do basic training for ourselves. How about you certify us to do basic training. We did, and we were able to stand down a whole basic training US-led apparatus and just watch them do it. That's the kind of partner you want. I don't have personal experience with them but from what I'm seeing, the Ukrainians also are an ideal partner.

As to return on investment. On the African continent of course it's like anywhere else in the world. There are some partners that are all around that spectrum. Partners that I think can be similar to the Syrian Democratic Forces would be the Nigeriens, I think are very capable. More than capable, they are willing. And I think the will is more important -- you can build the

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capability. It's hard to build the will. They've got to have the will.

I think the Somalis, particularly our partners, the Danab, they are the most capable and the most respected part of the Somalis security forces and Somali society and we want to continue that. We don't want that to go off the wheels.

I think that the Somalis, their larger security forces have been distracted by the last two years of complete political dysfunction and their search for extending the former President, and now they finally have a President. In fact their President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, in my first meeting with him he asked me how can Somalia garner more support from the United States than we're getting today? I said probably the best way is to be more like Ukraine and less like Afghanistan. He definitely seemed to take the point. We've already seen an uptick in Somali Security Forces' operations and OpTempo.

**DWG:** What did you learn as Commander of OIR in terms of mitigating civilian casualties on the battlefield that you were able to bring with you to AFRICOM and have extended as advice to Secretary Austin's Civilian Casualty Review that's ongoing in Washington?

**General Townsend:** I can't really say that I learned a lot about mitigating civilian casualties. We were doing everything in our power at OIR to mitigate civilian casualties then. And when I got here I saw that we were doing everything in our power here at AFRICOM to mitigate civilian casualties.

What I did bring here from that experience is how to talk about that more openly. When I got here we weren't publishing civilian casualty reports. We weren't publicizing the results of our investigations or any of those things which are all practices that we adopted at CJTF OIR. I thought what we needed to do is just be more open about what was happening on the battlefield.

So when I got here, I arrived in July of '19. I think in April, plus or minus April of '20 we published our first public civilian casualty report. We reported out on every allegation, every investigation, what was closed, what was still open. And we posted a number of ways on our public-facing website how to contact with some multiple languages and by phone or by email to

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report civilian casualties.

So I think that's the big thing. It's just try to be more transparent about it, and I think that we'll probably, I'm kind of proud to say I think we're leading the Department of Defense in that regard.

**Moderator:** The next question goes to Dan Lamothe of the Washington Post.

**DWG:** I wanted to dig down a bit farther on the Somalia angle, particularly the relatively rapid withdrawal you were ordered to carry out and then the shift back, more recently.

Can you flesh that out a bit in terms of what that looked like, getting forces out? I guess promises or assurances you may have had to provide to the Somalis through that period. And then more recently, what you've been able to put back in and how it looks now. Thanks.

**General Townsend:** In the waning weeks of the previous administration, we were directed to remove all US forces except for a small element that would remain behind in Mogadishu associated with the embassy, we were directed to remove all other US forces.

We didn't have a lot of US forces. Somewhere between 700 and 800 US forces were what was in Somalia at the time. However they were spread out and they had a lot of equipment there with them and it took a lot of hard work. We had about six weeks, six to eight weeks from time of notification to execute. It had to be done by the 15<sup>th</sup> of January. So we did. We got all of that done while in contact with a very determined enemy who was trying to attack us and disrupt what we were doing. But they saw it as an opportunity to make a statement as we were departing.

So we got all of our troops out in good order. Our mission did not change and none of those troops were directed to redeploy to home station. We were allowed to keep them, so we moved them to other locations in East Africa and we started commuting to work. So there really weren't a whole lot of assurances that we had to give to Somalia. We said we're still partnering with you, we've just got to fly in here and set up and train with you and advise you and then we've got to do that in fits and starts and

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iteratinos. So we did.

We did that for a good 190 to 120 days of that and I started doing assessments, and it was not as effective, it was not as efficient, and actually, my assessment, it increased risk to our forces. Most of the risk was in the movement in and the movement out. It might be counter-intuitive to some on this net but I'd rather be sitting at a base in Somalia behind my prepared defenses than coming and going to and from Somalia.

Pretty soon after the new administration got into office, they asked us what we thought about that decision. We started making the case that what I just said. And I told this to the Congress Ineffective, inefficient, increased risk to our troops. If we're going to do this mission we've either got to stop this altogether or let us go back.

As you know in May, there was a bunch of iteration briefings, et cetera. In May the President made a decision to authorize us to go back in with a persistent presence. It's smaller than it was before. But I think it can be effective. We're still in the initial stages of getting that established but we're back in and we're already seeing the advantages of persistent engagement with our Somali partners.

I mentioned earlier that their OpTempo has already increased. They're already conducting more operations, bolder operations, and I think that's because we're there with them. Even if we're not accompanying them on the battlefield we are there with them every day.

**DWG:** Manda Bay and Niger both stand as examples of things going off the rails a bit when you have an economy of force situation when a small number of US forces and your local security [inaudible] kind of undermine that. DO you see Somalia as a situation where you could run into the same problem with the smaller number of forces?

**General Townsend:** I wouldn't say never, because these are -- whether they're declared as such or not or recognized as such or not, these are combat zones. There is a determined enemy there who would like to kill Americans. Same thing in Niger. So is it possible that -- in fact I expect it's probably inevitable that we will have casualties in the future. Now will it be on the order of like Tongo Tongo or Amanda Bay? I don't think so.



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The reason I say that is we've learned from those events and we're operating much differently now today than we did then.

Now we still are economy of force. We still don't have a lot of resources. But we make sure that our resources are aligned to the operations and the risk that we're undertaking and the risk that we see with those operations.

So I won't say it won't happen again. But I suspect at some point, it's a combat zone, my 40 years of experience says we're going to take casualties at some point in the future but they probably won't be due to a lack of preparation or a lack of coordination or a lack of resources. My guess is it will be the fortunes of war.

If you engage in combat operations, even if you do everything right, you will take casualties eventually. That's my thought on that.

**Moderator:** Next is Jim Garamone of DoD News.

**DWG:** Sir, the real moneymaker for US Africa Command is your exercise program. And I think one of your accomplishments really has been the exercise funding had been cut. Is that back now? And do you anticipate I guess a more robust exercise program where you have the nations of the continent meeting and operating together?

**General Townsend:** You've rightly pointed out that our exercises are one of the most important parts of our engagement strategy. In fact, it is not unusual to see African troops and leaders -- every time we have a big exercise someone creates a patch for the exercise, and it's not unusual to see them wearing, months later, a year later, these guys are still wearing the patch from the exercise that they participated in. I've seen it on their CV, their bios, that this African colonel has participated in four iterations of African Lion. That kind of thing. It's important to them. It's important to us as well.

To answer your question about the resources, we have sustained reductions to exercises but not to the degree that -- so as the defense budget gets rolled out, we lay out our wish list, we get something usually far less than that initially, but then as the thing plays out over time we get resources added and we wind up, in my experience, getting not everything on our wish list, but a

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good chunk of it.

So our exercise program is still pretty robust. It's adequate, I think, so long as we don't see future reductions to those resources I'm satisfied with the amount of exercise engagement we can do in Africa.

**DWG:** One of the ways I guess you supplement maybe the exercise program is through that National Guard State Partnership program. Does that help you a lot? And how?

**General Townsend:** A lot. I'm a big fan of the National Guard State Partnership program. For those of you who may be a little less familiar with what that is, we have 15 African partners, 15 state in the United States have a partnership with African partners. Actually I think it's 13 states because two of them have taken on two African countries. But this is a decades-old program that started elsewhere in the world. It's migrated relatively recently to Africa in the last less than 20 years to Africa. So we have these states lined up. And their National Guard elements in those states -- Air and Army -- engage with the militaries of their African partners. Year-round, at a low level.

What I love about that program is it is at a low level. It's at a very user-friendly level. It's not big exercises, not a big engagement. It's sort of constant, low-level touches that you can see play out.

I'll give you a great example we're all very familiar with right now. Ukraine. Ukraine has benefitted from a long state partnership with our National Guard that has helped professionalize them in a slow sort of constant steady build. And then you get the services will come in with a big exercise or a big program or a big engagement more episodically. But I really like the State Partnership Program.

We have a waiting list of African partners who want to get on the State Partnership list and we probably can absorb about one a year, and I'm eagerly looking forward to our next state partnership because I think they're very valuable.

Let me make one other point about those. I think it was originally intended to be a partnership with the Guard. However, some states take it as a State Partnership, not a State

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Guard Partnership, a State Partnership. We have states out there that their Department of Transportation partners with that country's Department of Transportation. Their Department of Education partners. That I think is fantastic. I may actually have that backwards. That may have been the original intent. Some states go to that extent, some states don't. But I think we'd all be a lot better off if all the states out there could invest in their African partner across the whole of government and not just their military arm.

**Moderator:** Next question is Diego Laje of Signal Magazine.

**DWG:** I have a question in terms of China in Africa. They have shown to be very competent politically in the continent. Nevertheless, I would like to know where you see who are the best allies in political and military terms, and especially which capabilities they may be developing together.

**General Townsend:** You started out talking about China, but I don't think your question actually was about China. You asked me who the best allies were. Do you mean African allies or --

**DWG:** African allies. African allies who are allied with China and if they're developing military capabilities together, if they're receiving military aid, and if they're trying to push the envelope in terms of defense together.

**General Townsend:** As I mentioned in my opening discussion about the challenges there, and the challenges from strategic competitors. We see China competing mostly through economic means and development programs. That's what we see China doing mostly. But we all have to realize that China is a command economy. The Chinese Communist Party directs everything.

In our society we can't tell private industry what to do. We can't tell private industry where to invest. We can't tell private industry what to build. In their society they can direct, steer their economy, their diplomatic efforts, their defense efforts, et cetera, their development efforts. They can put all of that into what's a true whole of government program.

So we see them competing economically, which mostly keeps them off the radar in the sphere of military competition. We are aware of where they are competing militarily, but for the most

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part they have a base in Djibouti but I wouldn't say necessarily, I wouldn't call the Djiboutians the allies of the Chinese, they're certainly not aligned with the Chinese but they have given the Chinese access there.

We see the Chinese with making military efforts across the continent. One country would be Tanzania, for example. At the same time I wouldn't say that Tanzania is aligned with China in any kind of military alliance, and I don't really see them developing joint military capabilities.

Probably one area where I am focused on what China might be up to is on the Atlantic Coast. We know they would like to have a base on the Atlantic Coast. I don't think that's good for security of the United States or the West for the Chinese military to have a military base on the Atlantic coast of Africa. So we're watching that. They seem to have a little bit of traction in Equatorial Guinea. So we're keeping an eye on that.

That said, we haven't asked Equatorial Guinea to choose between us and the West or China. What we're doing is we're trying to convince them that it's in their interest to stay partnered with all of us and not choose one over the other.

So I think that's probably my observation with China. I don't see a lot of military cooperation to build military capability other than their attempts to provide some security assistance in some of those countries.

**Moderator:** Next is Jack Detsch of Foreign Policy.

**DWG:** You talked a little bit about sort of the distraction the Somali forces had faced in the last couple of years as the US was commuting to work. Can you talk a little bit about the effect on the Somali forces in general? What you see in terms of their capability now and then on the other side of the coin, how al-Shabaab is positioned.

**General Townsend:** Here's what I saw over the tenure of my tour. When I got here in '19 until about early 2020, maybe February/March or so. I was very pleasantly surprised at what I saw here. In fact it reminded me of Northern Iraq and Northern Syria.

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Another good partner I forgot to mention earlier, the Iraqi SOF forces, also an excellent partner.

Anyway, what I saw here in Somalia was progress. We were doing operations and I saw US trained Danab were leading the way; Turkish trained Gorgor battalions were operating there alongside; then the Somali Security Forces and at the time AMISOM would come behind and secure the area and would be the hold force and they would build a base for the hold force to stay. This was happening, we were pushing al-Shabaab back. I was very pleased to see that, and watch that unfold as I had in Syria and in Northern Iraq fighting ISIS.

Then two things happened. The President of Somalia then became consumed with trying to stay in office, to the point where he basically not only stopped all emphasis on military operations, but he then slewed his personal attention to inter-political struggles. The political scene just got dysfunctional and kind of ugly there in Somalia for a while. We didn't have a large outbreak of violence, but there were a lot of tense moments and some small outbreaks of violence in that process, political power moves.

We were able, very successful, to keep the US-trained Danab, the Lightning Brigade, out of that. We continued to operate. But it was just us and them at that point. The Somali Security Forces were doing the best they could. I thought their military leadership did a fairly commendable job of keeping them out of the political struggles, but there were times when the Somali Security Forces were pulled into the political struggles.

So we watched that consume the rest of the President's tenure, and then he got extended another year. Anyway. That took us through our withdrawal and we were commuting back to work, trying to make this work, when the Somali Security Forces were really focused on just trying to stay out of politics and not pressure al-Shabaab. It was a really difficult time there.

All that sort of got righted here after the first of the years as we saw the Somalis elect a new President and now they seem to be back on task. Their President seems to be very focused on all the right things. He is very focused on pulling together the federal member states into a way forward. And shortly after that our President approved our return to persistent presence. So things seem to be looking up.

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AMISOM has not changed to ATMIS, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia. But they're there for another couple of years and I have optimism for what lies ahead.

**DWG:** And a quick one on West Africa. What do you see as the impact of the French scaling down their counter-terror mission there? I guess focusing a little bit more on Chad and some other countries as opposed to Mali. And then just sort of the Russian role in stoking instability. Of course there were protests in that region, anti-Western protests that seemed to have a Russian hand in them earlier this year.

**General Townsend:** Let me finish, you asked a question I didn't answer before. The status of al-Shabaab.

I think that al-Shabaab in the roughly 15-18 months, 18 months plus that the Somali government was consumed by political struggles, and we were commuting to work. During that time al-Shabaab got bigger, bolder, stronger. So now we've got to blunt the initiative that they've enjoyed for 15 months or more. We've got to blunt that initiative.

You probably saw reporting that they made attacks into Ethiopia last weekend. They made attacks in and around Mogadishu as recently as yesterday, multiple [Bbid] attacks. We haven't see that kind of action in a while and that's that bigger, bolder, stronger al-Shabaab that I was talking about.

Now shifting to your question about France scaling back and Russian influence, et cetera.

I think France has done a smart thing. They have evaluated their campaign. Their relationship with the Malian government and security forces ruptured. They were asked to leave. So they're doing that. That coincides, it's a good impetus, it goes right with their campaign review. So they have made a new campaign and they are repositioning their forces now to do that.

During that process you see the rise of Russia. So there were, as you mentioned, there were pro-Russian demonstrations in the street, had the hand of Russia behind them, of course.

There are people there who have a soft spot in their heart for the Russians in Mali. So the Russians have gone back in there

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with Wagner. We think they have about a thousand or so in there now. They've recently brought in some sophisticated air domain surveillance radars and air defense capabilities. The only reason I can suspect they would need air defense capabilities is to keep the West from watching what they're doing. None of the enemies they're fighting have any air capability. But they've brought in some fairly substantial air defense capabilities there.

I think it's going to go bad. They're not going to help Mali. I think what we're seeing is we're actually seeing an uptick in al-Qaeda operations there in the form of JNIM. We're seeing an uptick in their operations focused on the Malian government and the Russian mercenary presence there.

In fact after a recent attack, one of the Emirs there of JNIM, a guy named Iyad Ag Ghaly was quoted in the press as saying if you feel like you can bring in these foreign mercenaries to kill the Malian people, then everything is subject to attack. So I think they're actually going to have the opposite impact there. I think what we're going to have to do right now, our African partners, the United States and the West, is contain that as best we can and let that play out.

**Moderator:** Next question is Andrew Eversden of Breaking Defense.

**DWG:** There's been a lot of discussion lately about the challenges that small drones or quad copters and what not pose to ground forces. I'm curious from your position at AFRICOM at combating VEO groups, how have you seen those groups using small drones, and maybe what capabilities do African partners need to combat them?

**General Townsend:** I experienced my first air attack by a drone as a US forces member near Mosel in 2016. ISIS figured out how to arm their drones and attack us either with kamikaze explosive-laden drones or drones that dropped field expedient munitions, or modified munitions. They got pretty sophisticated with that and we had to learn how to deal with that threat in 2016.

I don't know why it is, but we haven't seen that occur yet in Africa. But I expect it's coming any day.

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General Clark, the SOCOM Commander, was quoted the other day as saying as an American soldier I've never had to look up at the sky to worry about a threat. Now American soldiers do have to look up at the skies. For the last six years, American soldiers had to look up at the skies for threats. Maybe not from host nation or nation state fighters and bombers, but certainly from drones. They're proliferating everywhere rapidly. They're low cost. And they can be quite effective and challenging to defend against.

So we're fielding capabilities. The department is making sure we have the capabilities we need to protect our troops. CENTCOM has probably been the place where we've seen US forces attacked by these capabilities, so they have some capabilities that we don't yet have in AFRICOM, but CENTCOM has been attacked by armed drones by ISIS and by folks that we believe are Iranian aligned or Iranian sponsored groups.

In our theater we haven't seen that yet. What we do see is we see them using drones for reconnaissance. We believe they've used drones for fire direction. The reason we believe that is we have had instances where drones immediately preceded mortar or rocket attacks or were there during a mortar or rocket attack. Why else would you be doing that unless you were trying to direct fire?

And we've seen them precede ground assaults as well. I have not yet seen them come armed, but it won't surprise me when it happens.

**DWG:** Have African partners asked for any sort of [inaudible] capabilities from the United States?

**General Townsend:** Yes, they have. And we are working on ways to help those partners that have that problem. For the most part, where the terrorists are sophisticated enough to have that capability is where our troops already are, for the most part. So that makes it a little easier, but that's not true in all cases, so we're going to have to look at how we help those partners. I think this is going to be a big problem for all of the Western partners to help with.

**Moderator:** Next is Jeff Seldin of VOA.

**DWG:** You mentioned a little bit earlier al-Shabaab sending a



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force of about 500 fighters into Ethiopia. Probably the biggest ever al-Shabaab operation in Ethiopia. How do you see this movement? Is this al-Shabaab just spreading the war to a new front? Is it part of a bid to stake a claim to a larger caliphate of their own? And how critical have the African affiliated terror groups, al-Shabaab for al-Qaeda, the ISIS affiliates, become in terms of the global terrorism -- how much are the African groups maybe taking the lead now in how ISIS and al-Qaeda are operated?

**General Townsend:** The recent attack we saw by al-Shabaab, I don't know exactly what the number is, but suffice it to say probably several hundred al-Shabaab fighters launched into Ethiopia. Reports suggest they may have penetrated in some cases up to 130-150 kilometers deep in some cases into Ethiopia.

It appears that the Ethiopians, and I'm still trying to gather facts on this, but it appears that the Ethiopians have largely contained and defeated this incursion. But I don't believe this is a one-off. In fact it's only been less than a year ago that al-Shabaab Emir [Verigay] called for an increased emphasis on external attacks and increased emphasis on attacking Western targets in the Horn of Africa. And he specifically mentioned Kenya where they have operated in the past, but he mentioned Ethiopia and Djibouti as well. And don't quote me on this one, actually I know you're going to quote me on this but it was either Sudan or South Sudan I think he mentioned also. But I know he mentioned Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya.

Ethiopia, we really haven't seen them do anything in Ethiopia since about 2013. So this isn't the first attack in Ethiopia but certainly it is the largest one and it's the largest one, the first one in nine or ten years. In 2013 they had a failed bombing. At least that's what our records show.

He announced an intent less than a year ago to increase external operations in the Horn of Africa specifically targeting certain governments -- Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti being among them -- and attacking Western interests and targets in those countries. So this is not a fluke and it's not a one-off. This is a response to direction from the Emir of al-Shabaab who is a member of corporate al-Qaeda. So I expect to see more of this in the future. Although it looks like the Ethiopians did a pretty credible job of containing and defeating and they're still, as we understand it, they're still policing up the

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battlefield. Running down some remnants and what not.

So I expect to see more of this kind of activity because their Emir has called for it.

The second part of your question I think was around the influence of African leaders.

I don't believe that African leaders from either al-Qaeda affiliates or ISIS affiliates are running those global enterprises yet. However, we do know that they have we'll say corporate board positions now. Some people want to dismiss terrorist groups in Africa as wannabes. That is a mistake. This JNIM in West Africa is a real affiliate of al-Qaeda and Islamic Maghreb. Al-Shabaab is a real affiliate of corporate core al-Qaeda. And their leaders sit on the [Hatim] Committee, the corporate board of al-Qaeda. Similarly with ISIS as well, mostly in West Africa, ISIS Sahara and ISIS West Africa.

So those leaders are gaining in importance and influence in the corporate or global terrorist structures. They are not leading yet. But for example, al-Shabaab is the largest most powerful, most lethal and best funded. Al-Shabaab gives money to corporate al-Qaeda to fund operations globally. ISIS does too. ISIS in Africa does too, by the way.

**DWG:** Of late we've heard European officials being much more vocal about the war in Ukraine, taking needed attention away from the threat to Europe and to NATO's southern flank. Some saying Russia particularly is using the war in Ukraine as a distraction to do more stuff in Africa.

Are you seeing signs that Russia and China even have been able to use what's going on in the Ukraine to their advantage in Africa? And are you worried about Russia purposely expanding instability in Africa to increase pressure on European countries?

**General Townsend:** I guess I am a little concerned, or I'm alert to the possibility of Russia doing more in Africa, especially maybe to distract from Ukraine, but I'm not losing a lot of sleep about that. Here's why.

I think Russia is very stretched as they're doing what they're doing in Ukraine, so I don't think they have a lot of bandwidth

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to watch new adventures in Africa. Maybe I'll be proven wrong, but I don't think that's the case. In fact we've seen Wagner draw down a little bit on the African continent in the call to send fighters to Ukraine. So when the Russian MOD got into trouble in Ukraine, they called for help and Prigozhin was tasked to send fighters there. And he has. And we've seen most of that drawdown come from Libya. I really haven't seen it come from their new operations in Mali. Those have been relatively stable. But what we haven't seen is their operations in Mali grow at the rate -- the number is stabilized there and we expected it to grow a bit and it didn't, and I suspect that's also a function of Ukraine.

Probably the place where they have the greatest influence and sway is the Central African Republic. And I think that basically they prop up that government there with security and members of, advisors to the president, et cetera.

When I think of Wagner and other Russian mercenary groups in Africa, they're not there. They don't have any African country or people's best interests at heart. They're not there to help those people. They're there to gain access to resources, minerals, gemstones, gold, those kind of things, diamonds, et cetera, energy deposits. They're there to extract those for their profit and also to send back to Russia. They're there to gain influence for the Kremlin and they don't give a damn about the African people. They're there to help prop up dictators. That's my bottom line on Wagner.

**Moderator:** We have a long list of people who'd like to ask questions, just five minutes left. I promised the General a hard stop on time. The last question goes to John Harper of Defense Scoop.

**DWG:** Earlier you mentioned the drone threat and the need for counter-UAS capabilities. Are there any other technologies or emerging technologies that you haven't had at your disposal as AFRICOM Commander that you think AFRICOM will need in the future and its partner forces might need in the future to better accomplish their missions? If so, can you give some examples?

**General Townsend:** Sure For all the tech fans out there, there are some things that I'm interested in.

Counter-UAS capabilities for sure.

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I would tell you that long dwell, long duration ISR capabilities are I think a growth industry. I would be happy to volunteer for any pilot programs that folks want to propose out there in Africa. I'll give you some examples.

Our services and some of the other combatant commands are already experimenting with long duration balloons. This thing I've been reading about in the press, I think it's called the Zephyr, has been up flying around now for 36 or 37 days straight. It's a high altitude solar powered glider. I can just imagine having that capability on the African continent. It would be fantastic.

So yeah, I think very much so, there are some of those emerging technologies.

On a more pedestrian level, someone actually asked a question about it already, how about counter-UAS capabilities that work for partners?

So these counter-UAS capabilities, we have a potpourri of these things and some work better than others. This is not an easy thing to do to counter these things because they change and evolve so rapidly. So if we had some kind of magic drone-jammer that we could park in our FOB or put in a vehicle that when a drone shows up we press a button and all the drones go away, that would be awesome. I think that's a growth industry.

Then of course communications and command and control. Anything we can do to standardize and improve our interoperability not only with our African partners but our European or Western partners as well because sometimes we get down there and it's just hard to communicate with one another. Things like that are technologies we could certainly use.

**DWG:** A quick follow-up. We've seen with regard to communications, we've seen commercial capabilities like StarLink being used in Ukraine. I was wondering if you see any need or any use of those types of capabilities among partner forces in Africa. Do you think that would be helpful?

**General Townsend:** I'll equivocate a little bit I'll say maybe.

Actually, I've been watching that and reading probably the same

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reports that you have been about that, and I'm intrigued by it and I've asked my staff, hey, can we use that capability? If so, tell me how. I'll have the answer back, but I don't know. But I've asked the same question you just asked.

Thom, my staff's not going to like this, but I'll do ten more minutes if you've folks who still have questions, then I've got a hard stop.

**Moderator:** General, you're very kind. I'll watch the clock for ten, and I'll save a couple of minutes at the end for you also.

Christopher Woody of Insider.

**DWG:** I wanted to follow up on what you said about China. The US has obviously been working next to China in Djibouti for about five years now, and you've mentioned several times that China has ambitions for basing in West Africa. So if China has a more robust military presence in Africa. If Chinese ships are sailing around the continent and are more active on the ground there, what does that mean in practical terms for AFRICOM's forces? Do you have to be more cautious with your operations and with the signals you're putting out? Do you have to kind of adjust what you're doing in light of that?

**General Townsend:** First of all we would be more cautious around -- any time there's a near peer competitor operating in proximity you pay attention to that and you're more cautious.

But the truth is we've co-existed alongside the Chinese base there. They started that base in around 2014 I think. They finished it around 2017. They just recently inaugurated a new massive pier that connects to the base. A pier large enough, by the way, to berth two of the largest ships in the PLA Navy. Two aircraft carriers, or an aircraft carrier and a large deck amphib. Why they need that capability there, I don't know. I suspect they're thinking very deeply about the future and their future role in that region.

We've coexisted with that base and actually there's not a lot of tension really. They actually run into each other at various engagement activities there around Djibouti City. And in the past we've actually assisted one another. There was a fire at the city dump, actually, south of Camp Lemonnier a couple of years ago and the Djiboutians asked for help. We responded and

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we found ourselves our firefighters fighting alongside Chinese firefighters fighting along Djiboutian firefighters out to control the blaze at the city dump.

So although we have this competition, the facts are we sort of, we're co-existing down there. They've got their operations they do, they support three Chinese naval vessels that encounter piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

They also have other military activities in Africa. UN missions. They are very prominent, for example, in MINUSMA and other UN missions. And I think they're gaining experience as they do that.

None of that disturbs me as a military leader greatly. What I have my eye on are the potential operations they could do in the future.

So basing and where they might want to do that basing has my attention because of its potential implications for US forces and US security. But so far we haven't seen that other base emerge. We know they're trying and they're doing negotiations with several countries but we haven't seen that base emerge.

If we see that, if we see an increase in capability, I know they're modernizing their ships on the naval task force, they call it the Naval Expeditionary Task Force. I think the one they have there now is number 41 in the Gulf of Aden. They're modernizing those ships so they're coming with increased combat capability, but that's also something that any Navy would probably do.

So we're watching that. I'm not wringing my hands about it but we're certainly keeping an eye on it.

**Moderator:** Next on the list is Dmitry Kirsanov of TASS.

**DWG:** What exactly is your beef, if I may use this phrase, with the Russians and the Chinese in Africa? As far as I understand, you are saying that their activities, other than not wanting to see strategic competitors in Africa obviously. As far as I understand, you are saying that they sort of, that their activities is destabilizing. But then how come we don't see any high profile protests from the Africans themselves? Why do we see a statue to Wagner being erected in Bangui? I don't recall

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seeing any statues to American soldiers or a private military company in Africa.

**General Townsend:** Thanks for your loaded question. Here's my thoughts on that.

Look, I'm not going to apologize for my views about what I see happening in Africa nor are you going to sway my views or am I likely to sway your views. Here's my experience.

My experience, starting with Wagner, starts in Syria. And my experience with the Russian MOD forces there. I actually found my Russian interlocutors in the Ministry of Defense to be professional and I was able to get business done in what was a very tense and crowded and fraught with risk battlespace in Northern Syria. There were about four or five different fights going on there at the same time. Some of us were fighting ISIS. Others had other agendas. But I found my engagements with the Russian Ministry of Defense officials there to be very professional.

In fact I think one of my counterparts is now the Chief of Staff of your Air Force, General Sergei Surovikin, was there in Syria when I was there.

Anyway, I actually enjoyed most of my engagements with those counterparts.

Wagner, on the other hand, was a different thing altogether because they're not beholden to any rules or laws of armed conflict, and they attacked my forces on a couple of occasions. And we tried to dissuade them from that, and it resulted in force on both sides, and anyway, that's how that went. Wagner came out on the bad end of that, and you probably are aware of the engagements that I'm talking about.

That was my first engagement with this -- Russian forces up close and personal which I thought were professional, and then this mercenary group.

And now I'm seeing them in Africa. And I stand by everything I said about Wagner down there.

So if they're erecting statues to Wagner, great. I'm happy for the folks that are doing that, happy for Wagner. I stand by the

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fact that I don't see that Wagner has any good intentions to help the people of Africa. They're there to make a profit. And they're there to prop up dictators.

**DWG:** One point of clarification. You said they attacked my forces, your forces. Are you talking about Syria or Africa?

**General Townsend:** I was talking about Syria then.

**DWG:** Okay. Got it.

**Moderator:** General, I am incredibly grateful for all of your time and wisdom and experience today. And I wanted to give you the last couple of minutes for any closing comments before again I thank you for your service and wish you the best of luck as you write the next chapter of your life, sir.

**General Townsend:** Thanks, Thom. Thanks to all of you on the net there who joined us today.

I've actually, believe it or not, more often than not I've enjoyed this engagement over the course of my career. When I was a young lieutenant we didn't talk to reporters much. The reporters didn't come around much and when they did, we didn't have anything to say.

Then somewhere along the line, I don't know, I became a major or lieutenant colonel. We started being encouraged to talk to the media and you all started showing up regularly, and I've actually enjoyed this relationship. I believe it's important to tell the American people and the citizens of the world what we're doing. I was given really good guidance right up front. First, stay in your lane. Second, always have your uniform squared away. And third, speak the truth

So that guidance has I think kept me out of hot water generally over the years of engaging with the press and I've just tried to be as straightforward as I can. Those of you who have engaged with me know I'm direct. I'm not a diplomat or a politician. I'm a soldier and I talk like a soldier.

Anyway, I wanted to say that right off the bat.

And I'll say this. I'm taking off the uniform here after 40 years of service, giving up the command here on the 9<sup>th</sup> of



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August. Pending Senate confirmation, and it's looking positive, I think my replacement will be confirmed and we'll have a change of command here on the 9<sup>th</sup>. You're all invited if you're in the area. Come to Stuttgart and see our change of command. Then I'm retiring after that. And I'm looking forward to that, actually. I don't have any anxiety about this change of life. Forty years is long enough to do anything, even if you love it, and I have loved this. I've especially enjoyed my time here at AFRICOM because it's a fascinating place. I had no experience with the African continent before I got this job, and I have loved every minute of it. You never know what's going to happen on any given day.

So thanks for listening to me here and thanks for doing your part to inform the American people. Even when we disagree, I think you're doing the best that you can do to inform the American people and I appreciate that.

Thanks for listening to me today.

**Moderator:** General, thank you for a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion and we are in complete agreement. The purpose of this organization is to foster an elevated debate, to inform the American people. We've done that today. So our sincerest thanks to you and your staff and all the correspondents on the line. Thanks.

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