

Remote C.I.A. Base in the Sahara Steadily Grows

The agency has been conducting surveillance flights from the base, which has grown since 2018. Any drone strikes would be limited while the Biden administration carries out a review.



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WASHINGTON — Deep in the Sahara, the C.I.A. is continuing to conduct secret drone flights from a small but steadily expanding air base, even as the Biden administration has temporarily limited drone strikes against suspected terrorists outside conventional war zones, such as Afghanistan, while it weighs whether to tighten Trump-era rules for such operations.

Soon after it set up the base in northern Niger three years ago, the C.I.A. was poised to launch drone strikes from the site.

But there is no public evidence that the agency has carried out anything but surveillance missions so far. The base was added to a small commercial airport largely to pay closer attention to southwestern Libya, a notorious haven for Al Qaeda, the Islamic State and other extremist groups that operate in the Sahel region of Niger, Chad and Mali.

The expanding capabilities at the base indicate that the C.I.A. would be ready to carry out armed drone strikes if the high-level review permits them.

In the meantime, the agency's surveillance and reconnaissance missions appear to proceed, within the temporary constraints on strikes.

New satellite imagery shows that the air base in Dirkou, Niger, has grown significantly since The New York Times first reported the C.I.A. operations there in 2018, to include a much longer runway and increased security. The new imagery also shows for the first time what appears to be an MQ-9 Reaper drone taxiing to or from a clamshell hangar. The Times previously observed what was most likely a U-28A, an aircraft often used to support Special Operations Forces.



What appears to be an MQ-9 Reaper at a base in Dirkou, Niger, on March 3. Planet Labs

Under a directive that Mr. Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, quietly imposed on Jan. 20, Inauguration Day, the military and the C.I.A. must now obtain White House permission to attack terrorism suspects in poorly governed places where there are scant or no American ground troops, such as Somalia, Yemen and Libya.

Under the Trump administration, they had been allowed to decide for themselves whether circumstances on the ground met certain conditions and an attack was justified.

The Biden administration's review comes at a time when rising waves of terrorism and violence have seized Africa's Sahel region, a vast sub-Saharan scrubland that stretches from Senegal to Sudan, and are threatening to spread. The Islamic State in Libya has actively sought fresh recruits traveling north from West African nations, including Senegal and Chad.

Armed groups have attacked bridges, military convoys and government buildings. The threat is pushing south from the Sahel into areas previously untouched by extremist violence, including the Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo and Ghana, where the Pentagon has a logistics hub.

Security has worsened to the point where the Pentagon's Africa Command told the Defense Department's inspector general last year that it had abandoned for the moment a strategy of weakening the Islamist militants, and instead was mainly trying to contain the threat.

"Security continues to deteriorate in the Sahel as instability spreads and threatens coastal West Africa," Colin Kahl, Mr. Biden's nominee to be the Pentagon's top policy official, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in written responses to questions in advance of a hearing last week. "We cannot ignore that persistent conflict in Africa will continue to generate threats to U.S. personnel, partners and interests from violent extremist organizations."

The Pentagon's Africa Command operates MQ-9 Reaper drones from Niamey, Niger's capital, 800 miles southwest of Dirkou; and from a \$110 million drone base in Agadez, Niger, 350 miles west of Dirkou. The military has carried out drone strikes against Qaeda and Islamic State militants in Libya, but none since September 2019.

Some security analysts question why the United States needs both military and C.I.A. drone operations in the same general vicinity to combat insurgents in Libya and the Sahel. In addition, France, which has about 5,100 troops in the Sahel region, began conducting its own Reaper drone strikes from Niamey against insurgents in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali.

A recent report by the International Crisis Group concluded that the military-first strategy of France and its allies, including the United States, has failed. The research and advocacy organization, which focuses on conflict zones, noted in its report that focusing on local peacemaking efforts could achieve more.

"Paris and its partners should reorient their approach to one rooted in efforts to prioritize governance, notably by soothing the escalating tensions among communities and between communities and the state in rural areas, which jihadists exploit, and by improving governments' delivery of basic services to citizens," the report concluded.

The C.I.A. began setting up the base in Dirkou in February 2018 to improve surveillance of the region, partly in response to an ambush in October 2017 in another part of Niger that killed four American troops. The Dirkou airfield was labeled a United States Air Force base as a cover, said a United States official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss confidential operational matters.

The C.I.A. operation in Dirkou is burdened by few, if any, of the political sensitivities that the United States military confronts at its locations, said one former American official involved with the project.

A C.I.A. spokesman, Timothy L. Barrett, declined to comment. A spokeswoman for the Africa Command, Nicole Kirschmann, said the site at Dirkou was considered "a non-enduring base" for the military, and that the command was not involved in any recent construction at the base.

Clearly, someone has been. The original 5,250-foot runway has roughly doubled in length in the past two years and has been widened in portions, with paving and other construction evident from satellite imagery taken as recently as last week.



An airstrip being extended at a drone base in Dirkou, Niger. As of March 2021, the paving of the airstrip has been almost completed. Planet Labs

An initial expansion of the airstrip was first seen in satellite images in early 2019. A longer runway is normally used to accommodate faster or larger aircraft. However, no new hangars have been constructed that could house additional planes.

Late in his presidency, Barack Obama sought to put the military in charge of drone attacks after a backlash arose over a series of highly visible strikes, some of which killed civilians. The move was intended, in part, to bring greater transparency to attacks in which the United States often refused to acknowledge its role.

Mr. Obama had curtailed the C.I.A.'s lethal role by limiting its drone flights, notably in Yemen. However, the C.I.A. program was not fully shut down worldwide, as the agency and its supporters in Congress balked.

The drone policy was changed in 2017, after Mike Pompeo, the C.I.A. director at the time, made a forceful case to President Donald J. Trump that the agency's broader counterterrorism efforts were being needlessly constrained. The C.I.A. broadened its drone operations with the move to Dirkou, adding to the agency's limited covert missions at the time in eastern Afghanistan for strikes in Pakistan, and in southern Saudi Arabia for attacks in Yemen.

The Biden administration's review of legal and policy frameworks governing targeting is still in preliminary stages. Officials are said to be gathering data, including official estimates of civilian casualties in both military and C.I.A. strikes outside of battlefield zones during the Trump era. A spokeswoman for the White House's National Security Council, Emily Horne, said that no decisions have been made about new rules.

Some leading congressional Republicans have criticized the administration's temporary limits on counterterrorism drone strikes and commando raids.

"This action is yet another bureaucratic impediment created by the Biden administration that will give our enemies an advantage over the United States and our allies," said Representative Mike Rogers of Alabama, the senior Republican on the House Armed Services Committee. He was joined by Representative Michael McCaul of Texas, the senior Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in the statement last week.

Counterterrorism specialists warn that without Pentagon and C.I.A. operations to support French-led missions in the Sahel, the security situation could spiral further out of control.

"Al Qaeda and the Islamic State have expanded operations in the Sahel," said Bill Roggio, editor of the Long War Journal, a website run by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies that tracks military strikes against militant groups. "The costs of operating from Dirkou, both financially and politically, are extremely low."