Oxford Research Group
Remote Warfare Programme

IN FOCUS

IMPROVING THE UK OFFER IN AFRICA: LESSONS FROM MILITARY PARTNERSHIPS ON THE CONTINENT

Abigail Watson

Emily Knowles

March 2019

Introduction

Conflict in the Middle East and international support to the anti-IS Coalition have dominated headlines over the last few years. However, this is not the only region where the UK is working with local forces in the face of violent conflict and terrorism. We call this approach to contemporary military operations remote warfare, because international partners are countering threats at a distance without the deployment of large numbers of their own military forces. The African continent is a congested space for this sort of activity, with multiple overlapping unilateral, bilateral and multilateral efforts aimed at building stability, countering terrorist activity and building the capacity of local partners.

Remote warfare is not necessarily a new feature of military operations on the continent, but it is a strategic growth area. The March 2018 National Security and Capability Review (NSCR) outlined how British activities on the continent "will change and expand..."[1] with the subsequent Modernising Defence Programme (MDP) detailing how the British presence in forty African countries "gives us a platform to help develop the institutions that will deliver peace and security in the region."[2] Prime Minister Theresa May used a trip to South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya in the summer of 2018 to champion "a new partnership between the UK and our friends in Africa", highlighting the pivotal role the UK was playing to support its partners to fight instability on the continent:

"Nigerian troops on the frontline against Boko Haram have received specialist training from Britain. Count-er-terror operations in Mali are being supported by British Chinook helicopters. British troops in Kenya have trained African Union peacekeepers heading for Somalia, while also working with international partners to reform the Somalian security forces for the long-term."[3]

By September 2018 when we arrived in Mali and Kenya to build on our research into remote warfare, we were told that budgets were on the rise and the UK was doing its best to lean in and support its partners across the continent. The year before, the British Peace Support Team, which trains local troops participating in African Union operations to counter al-Shabaab in Somalia, had widened its geographic mandate to cover the whole continent.[4] In Mali, the arrival of three Royal Air Force Chinook helicopters in July 2018 had heralded 'the next stage' in UK support to allied operations to counter the spread of jihadist groups and support local security forces.[5]

This uplift in the UK military's strategic attention to activities in Africa is welcome, particularly as it forms part of broader efforts to develop a "more strategic approach to [the UK's] work in conflict-affected states."[6] The most visible sign of this was the creation of a joint pool of funding, between the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), called the Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). Across government, this institutionalised a direct link between the National Security Council's (NSC) strategies and projects on the ground; for instance, through the new Regional Boards which put forward strategies for approval at the NSC level and oversee the delivery of NSC strategies in their respective regions and countries. It also increased programmatic funding to over £1 billion a year.[7]

However, for anyone hoping that increased political attention would lead to the clear prioritisation of military activities or the clarity of strategic objectives, initial feedback is not encouraging. As was neatly summarised by one soldier, the British approach to security partnerships on the continent could

be described as one where "we just throw some men here and some men there."[a] This brief is based on field research conducted in Kenya and Mali in September 2018 with British and international military personnel, as well as telephone interviews with British personnel rotating in and out of Nigeria between September-December 2018. It focusses on the military contribution to UK efforts in these countries and, particularly, on two initial findings from a broader project examining the factors for success and failure of remote warfare, namely:

- The current strategic disconnect between stated ambitions for the British contribution to security on the African continent and the activities being run to build partner capacity;

- A short-term approach to partnerships that prioritises tactical activities over broader institutional support and reform that might address underlying causes of conflict.

The disconnect between aspiration and activity

In a 2018 assessment of the CSSF by the Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI), it was noted that – despite some improvements – the government still "lack[ed] a clear logic connecting the activities they support to the [stated] objective of promoting sustainable peace, stability and security."[8] Similarly, several Framework Suppliers told the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy that their ability to understand and respond to the Government's priorities was hampered by a lack of clarity.[9]

These same concerns were reflected in our interviews with soldiers on the ground, who were frustrated that they seemed to be "operating in a political vacuum"[b] despite the stated strategic importance of African partnerships. For example, in Mali, there were a few men scattered across the multiple international military initiatives in the country being run by the EU, the UN and the French without a clear sense of how these activities – in aggregate – might lead to a sustainable improvement in the capacity of their Malian partners. In addition, when we asked about the strategic join up between an expanding British focus on the Sahel and ongoing support to countries like Nigeria who are also countering instability and terrorist groups operating around the Lake Chad Basin, the response was that work was beginning to integrate those strategies, but that coordination remained personality-driven rather than institutionalised.

Similarly, in Kenya, the expansion of the then-British Peace Support Team East Africa (BPST-EA) to cover the

whole of the continent had only come with an uplift in capacity of a handful of personnel and no clear direction as to where and how to expand activities. Instead, many of our interviewees spoke of carrying out legacy training courses, not because they had been directed to do so but "because no one told [them] not to."[c]

A particular sticking point was whether it would be better to understand UK training activity in countries like Kenya as tactical and transactional rather than strategic and transformational when it came to its impact on partner behaviour. As one soldier put it: "As an embedded security adviser, am I making these people any better? Probably not. However, I am sending a political message."[d] For instance, more than one interviewee pointed out that offering the Kenyans peace support training might be one way to offset the fact that the British rely on a facility in Kenya to train the entirety of the British infantry. This, in principle, is no bad thing. The UK has pinpointed improving political access and influence in country as a stated national objective. However, the fact that there appeared to be some confusion about whether – and to what extent – this was the point of activities on the ground is not ideal.

In both countries, soldiers were sceptical that there was the political appetite to measure the effects of their training activities with local partners in a way that would capture long-term progress or overarching strategic goals like building accountable, effective, legitimate local security forces. While there are concerted and ongoing efforts to address this, many interviewees expressed their frustration with the fact that they continued to lose sight of local forces the moment they left the training courses, with no reliable mechanism for feeding back whether their conduct or capabilities on operations ultimately improved.

In addition, because those developing strategy in London were not effectively communicating with those on the ground, many soldiers expressed concerns that future activities would not have more chance of being successful in the long-term. As an interviewee with experience in Nigeria put it, decision-makers in London viewed themselves as "the A team", reducing deployed personnel to the status of "the B or the C team".[e] On occasion this led to decisions being made in London that would have run counter to the advice of local troops, if they had been consulted as part of the strategic process. Although beyond the scope of this briefing, ICAI's broader assessment of CSSF programmes also flagged "weak results management and insufficient learning" as a key problem with other, non-military, efforts as well – arguing that this risked undermining the UK "contribution to building peace,

a   Interview (4/9/2018)
b   Interview (20/09/2018)

c   Interview (20/9/2018)
d   Interview (4/9/2018)
e   Interview (15/10/2018)

stability and security."[10]

As British strategic aims expand in the region, matching activity to aspirations will become even more important. As the next section explores, this will require rethinking the current approach to working with local partners if it is to succeed in delivering bold strategic aims for the continent.

Doing what we can

As the UK military continues to look at ways to improve its own contribution to British efforts with partners on the African continent, it is problematic that so many soldiers appear to agree that the courses that they are offering partners do little to deal with the real problems affecting stability in the countries in which they were deployed.

At a most basic level, UK soldiers continue to struggle to fill courses with the right people – i.e. those in the most suitable areas of the partner forces' militaries who would soon need such skills in the field.[f] Due, in part, to differences in training priorities between international and partner forces and a lack of manned training capacity from partner forces (who undertake training on top of their operational demands), this can have a detrimental impact on the effectiveness of UK training. In Kenya, there was reference to "egg flippers", slang in some parts of the British Army for chefs, being used to fill spaces on UK courses .[g] Dr Marco Jowell, Director of the Africa Research Group, found the same problems were true of the International Peace Support Training Centre (based on the same site as BPST in Kenya), who constantly struggle to fill classes with the right people and track whether those who attend the courses are deployed onto the right missions.[11]

In Mali, one soldier called for "an adult conversation about what [our partners'] need and what we can deliver", comparing the current EU training mission approach to a builder that "just turned up at your house and started fixing things you hadn't asked for."[h] Beyond this, many soldiers argued that delivering these courses did not address the institutional problems which were causing instability in the countries in which they were engaged. In Kenya, a number of soldiers argued that UK operations, were not "actually [going to] achieve anything"[i] – instead, they suggested that the UK is doing just enough to stop things getting worse[j] or to look like it is doing something.[k]

Similarly, Jowell says of the IPSTC in Kenya that, while such operations may allow donor governments to

claim they have trained thousands of local forces for peacekeeping operations, "the effect on improved peacekeeping is less clear."[12] The lack of political appetite to deal with underlying problems in partner security sectors – that may be providing space for terrorist groups to thrive – can be stark. For example in Nigeria, where CSSF documents highlight the clear objective of "support[ing] the Armed Forces of Nigeria (AFN) operating in the North East" of the country[13] (where the threat of Boko Haram is most prominent) one said that, given the nature of the training activities currently being undertaken, "it is hard to show that [our activities are] having an impact."[l] He added, the UK was "treating the symptoms not the causes of the problem [when] the whole defence structure here needs institutional reform."[m]

In Mali, the EU is currently training large numbers of local troops in basic soldiering without exerting much pressure on the government in Bamako to introduce structural reforms that might remove some of the factors that are weakening the armed forces. One example is the ethnic composition of the force, which is skewed towards those from the south of the country. Accelerating the growth of an unrepresentative force in the context of ongoing conflicts between different ethnicities in Mali could be extremely detrimental to long-term security. Yet international training activities appear to be retreating to tactical activity rather than dealing with the long-term strategic aims of building effective, accountable, legitimate forces who will become better security providers for their countries and regions.

This is not a problem restricted to the African continent, and it is a theme that we pick up in more depth (along with a longer discussion of the reforms that the British military are trialling to get around these problems) in a trio of reports on the military, political and legal implications of a shift towards remote warfare.[14] While territorial successes against groups like ISIS are bolstering hope that, under the right conditions, Western support to local partners can provide the conditions for stability, there are many dangers with such an approach. Even away from the high-intensity conflicts in Iraq and Syria, our recent interviews with personnel in Mali, Kenya and Nigeria reveal the complexity of such operations. In this sense, the current UK military offer to Africa should perhaps stand as a cautionary tale to those who believe such capacity building can provide quick and easy results.

---

f   Interview (4/9/2018)
g   Interviews (4/9/2018)
h   Interview (10/9/2018)
i   Interview (4/9/2018)
j   Interview (4/9/2018)
k   Interview (4/9/2018)

---

l   Telephone interview (5/10/2018)
m   Telephone interview (5/10/2018)

Conclusion

So far, despite the support of the UK and its allies to Kenya, Nigeria and Mali, as well as other troop contributing countries in the region, none seem much closer to developing able, accountable and legitimate security forces. Nigeria is still struggling to stem violence from Boko Haram, who in January forced more than 8 000 people to flee into Cameroon to escape escalating violence in the North East of Nigeria.[15] Mali's army has been described as "inefficient and prone to commit abuses against civilians."[16] Similarly, despite the many successes of the African Union Mission in Somalia – not least in that it is the first time the African Union has done this sort of operation and that it unites so many different troop contributing countries behind a shared purpose – it is still failing to provide security in Somalia even after more than a decade of operations.[17]

Rather than winding down, international efforts to build stability and counter terrorist groups in the region have intensified in recent years. United States Africa Command has increased its operations in Somalia, carrying out at least 46 airstrikes in the country last year, compared to the previous record of 38 in 2017.[18] The UK, like many of its allies, have once again promised to increase support to the Nigerian government as it continues its fight against Boko Haram.[19] And France continues to try and rally regional, local and international actors to support its operations in Mali.[20]

As the UK looks to develop and improve its cross-government efforts in places like Kenya, Mali and Nigeria, lessons drawn from soldiers delivering the military contribution to these efforts are important. Certainly, it highlights that while progress is being made, more strategic direction is required to ensure that these operations feed into national objectives and complement non-military activities in country. Particularly, many soldiers called for a "deep and narrow" approach, where – instead of "throwing some men here and some men there" – the UK Government decides which areas hold the most strategic importance and commit the resources, both politically and militarily, required to address the problems of instability and conflict.

This will come as no surprise to the government, which has long recognised the fact that there are no easy answers to instability in these countries.[21] Improving the long-term impact of these efforts will, however, require the serious prioritisation of aspirations and activities if we are to stand a chance of breaking out of a cycle of violence and setting the conditions for a more stable future.

References

1 HM Government, "National Security Capability Review," March 2018, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/705347/6.4391_CO_National-Security-Review_web.pdf.

2 "Mobilising, Modernising & Transforming Defence: A Report on the Modernising Defence Programme" (Ministry of Defence, Defence 2018), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/765879/ModernisingDefenceProgramme_report_2018_FINAL.pdf.

3 Theresa May, "PM's Speech in Cape Town," GOV.UK, August 28, 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-in-cape-town-28-august-2018.

4 BPST(Africa), "The British Peace Support Team (Eastern Africa) Has Changed Its Name to British Peace Support Team (Africa) - It Remains an Integrated Team, Building Regional Capacity for United Nations & African Union Peace Support Operations.Pic.Twitter.Com/OmFOOdHbRd," Tweet, @bpst_a (blog), December 5, 2017, https://twitter.com/bpst_a/status/937935189711511552?lang=en.

5 Ministry of Defence, "UK Deployment in Mali Reaches the next Stage," GOV.UK, July 18, 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-deployment-in-mali-reaches-the-next-stage.

6 Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, "Conflict, Stability and Security Fund," Second Report of Session 2016-17 (House of Commons and House of Lords, January 30, 2017), https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201617/jtselect/jtnatsec/208/208.pdf.

7 Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

8 Independent Commission for Aid Impact.

9 Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, "Conflict, Stability and Security Fund."

10 Independent Commission for Aid Impact, "The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund's (CSSF) Aid Spending."

11 Marco Jowell, "The Unintended Consequences of Foreign Military Assistance in Africa: An Analysis of Peacekeeping Training in Kenya," Journal of Eastern African Studies 12, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 102–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2017.1418187.

12 Jowell.

13 CSSF, "North East Nigeria Security and Conflict and Stabilisation Programme," n.d., https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/758139/AFRA_Nigeria_North_East_Programme_Summary_FY_18_19.odt.

14 Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, "Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres," Oxford Research Group, June 27, 2018, https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/remote-warfare-lessons-learned-from-contemporary-theatres; Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, "No Such Thing as a Quick Fix: The Aspiration-Capabilities Gap in British Remote Warfare," Oxford Research Group, July 30, 2018, https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/no-such-thing-as-a-quick-fix-the-aspiration-capabilities-gap-in-british-remote-warfare; Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson, "Lawful But Awful? Legal and Political Challenges of Remote Warfare and Working with Partners" (Oxford Research Group, May 31, 2018), https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/awful-but-lawful-legal-and-political-challenges-of-remote-warfare-and-working-with-partners.

15 Ruth Maclean, "Thousands Flee North-East Nigeria after Devastating Boko Haram Attack," The Guardian, January 17, 2019, sec. Global development, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/jan/17/thousands-flee-north-east-nigeria-after-devastating-boko-haram-attack-rann-cameroon-bodo.

16 Jennifer O'Mahony, "UK Troops Sent to Africa's Jihadist Belt to Fight Extremism and Migration in British 'pivot to Sahel'','" The Telegraph, October 6, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/10/06/uk-troops-sent-africas-jihadist-belt-fight-extremism-migration/.

17 Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Little to Gloat About: Counterterrorism and State-Building in Somalia One-Year after Garissa," Brookings (blog), April 3, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/little-to-gloat-about-counterterrorism-and-state-building-in-somalia-one-year-after-garissa/.

18 Tomi Oladipo, "How the US Has Stepped up Its War in Somalia," BBC News, January 7, 2019, sec. Africa, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46612542.

19 "Nigeria: Extremism & Counter-Extremism," Counter Extremism Project, November 3, 2015, https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/nigeria; Prime Minister's Office, "UK and Nigeria Step up Cooperation to End Boko Haram Threat," GOV.UK, August 29, 2018, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-nigeria-step-up-cooperation-to-end-boko-haram-threat.

20 Alex Thurston, "Mali's Tragic But Persistent Status Quo," RLS Research Paper (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2008), http://www.rosalux.sn/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/RLS_DAKAR_PC_01_2018n.pdf.

21 Knowles and Watson, "No Such Thing as a Quick Fix."