



## “Playing the away game”: AFRICOM in the Sahara-Sahel



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### ABSTRACT

This article presents evidence to revise hypotheses of how biopolitical strategies are deployed in contemporary global security regimes, and with what effects. It is based on research into the US military's Africa Command (AFRICOM). Elaborating on two concepts that Michel Foucault hypothesized in his *Security, Territory, Population* lectures –the “people” and the “milieu” –I argue that AFRICOM's strategy is informed by biopolitical rationalities, but that this does not necessarily situate African populations as either part of a population to secure or as a threat to that population. Instead, I suggest that (unlike in the urban and national contexts that Foucault analyzed) biopolitical security strategies at the global scale are characterized by varying degrees of distance between the way(s) of life they aim to defend and what Foucault termed the “field of intervention” or “milieu” that they target. This hypothesis, and its elaboration through the case of AFRICOM, contributes to efforts to historicize and spatialize accounts of contemporary biopolitics. Specifically, it suggests that we can better understand the production of very uneven geographies of security and insecurity by attending to the relationships between the ways of life being secured and the (potentially distant) material contexts situated as relevant “fields of intervention”.

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We really want to play an away game and we need teammates to do it. ... And we need to be sure that as conflict approaches –and conflict will approach –we have a shot at shaping it before we're in it. (Cited in [Garamone, 2015](#))

– Army General Martin E Dempsey. June 11, 2015

In 2008, the Africa Command (AFRICOM) became fully operational as the US military's “unified combatant command,” taking over command and control for all military activity related on the continent (except Egypt). AFRICOM was described from the beginning as a “new kind of command,” tailored to unique security conditions on the African continent. Specifically, Africa's so-called ‘weak’ and ‘failing’ states and ‘ungoverned spaces’ (characteristics that, previously, were understood to situate African spaces as marginal to international order) were interpreted by civilian and military policy makers to be sources of emerging 21st century threats. Increasing US military presence on the continent was presented as a necessary means to prevent Africa's desert regions from becoming the “next Afghanistan” (e.g. [Schmidle, 2009](#)) as well as to enable access to strategic resources in potentially unstable contexts (especially oil in the Gulf of Guinea, which was forecasted

at the time to source 25% of US oil by 2015) ([African Oil Policy Initiative Group, 2002](#); [Lubeck, Lipschutz and Watts, 2007](#)). With weak state capacity and vulnerable populations identified as the security risks, AFRICOM was introduced as having a unique, “interagency” approach suited to a wide range of “conflict prevention” and “capacity building” interventions, directed at both state institutions and local populations ([Berschinski, 2007](#), p. 1).

AFRICOM's interagency design was advertised as a new approach for the military to prevent conflict by contributing to development and humanitarian objectives targeting vulnerable populations. As such, the command seems to fit within widely observed shifts toward ‘non-traditional’ security analyses and strategies, which target non-state threats such as transnational crime, terrorism, pandemics, and natural disasters. A growing body of International Relations research has interpreted security regimes' increasing attention to these threats (especially in counter-terrorism practices after 2001) as indicating the incorporation of biopolitical security, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (e.g. [Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero, 2008](#); [Dillon & Reid, 2009](#); [Evans, 2011](#); [Jabri, 2007](#); [Kiersey, 2009](#)). According to Foucault, techniques of biopolitical security are directed at the protection of the biological life of a population from diverse, distributed threats and risks, and are distinct from (though variously entangled with) the ‘traditional’ territorial security of the sovereign state, which is defended through techniques of war ([Foucault, 2007](#)).

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Recent research suggests that the population-centric security practices that Foucault first identified within the liberal nation-state have gone global (Dillon & Reid, 2009; Evans, 2011; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Kiersey, 2009; Reid, 2006). Biopolitical security practices are wielded through (predominantly ‘Western’-led) institutions and practices of global governance, formal and informal, which aim to regulate conditions of life in line with normative values of resilience, risk-taking and innovation. Initiatives to, for example, promote human rights, increase poor populations’ ‘resilience’ to conflict or climate change, impact population-wide education, birth, and mortality rates, or thicken connections of global trade and finance are pursued as security technologies that optimize and defend liberal ways of life from those interpreted as deficient, potentially dangerous and/or somehow anti-global. In most accounts, this opens up spaces where life is seen as deficient to myriad forms of intervention, aimed at transforming deficient or dangerous ways of life to conform to an ideal vision of the liberal subject. For this theoretical point to be valid in practice, the biopolitical threat assessments produced in the institution of AFRICOM would translate into policies aimed at transforming populations’ ways of life.

While this literature is theoretically rich, its empirical evidence commonly relies on discourse analyses of policy documents and rhetoric produced within Western states and organizations, attending less to questions of how these policies are produced and applied differently, with different effects, in particular spaces (e.g. Abrahamsen, 2005; De Larrinaga & Doucet, 2008; Evans, 2010; Jabri, 2006; Kienscherf, 2011; Vasilache, 2014). Policy discourses themselves tend to characterize international security policies as homogeneously normalizing, to the degree that security is rhetorically associated with the universal expansion of liberal order and the containment of threatening and non-conforming populations. Consistent with this discourse, theories of biopolitical security have suggested that the ordering of global populations is *both* the objective *and* the object of security interventions. That is, biopolitical security interventions are understood to intervene on particular populations’ ways of life in order to secure life at larger spatial scales.

Other analysts – particularly geographers – have cautioned against aspatial and ahistorical interpretations of contemporary biopolitical practices and their effects (e.g. Bryan, 2015, p. 35; Coleman & Grove, 2009; Li, 2010; Reid-Henry, 2011). To the degree that biopolitical security logics seem to correlate with the securitization of a *global* population of concern (e.g. humanity), *all* populations’ vulnerabilities are assumed to be securitized according to the same logics and, theoretically, to be subject to equivalent tactics of power. This theoretical assumption both legitimates, and is reinforced by, the reliance on policy discourse analysis that has characterized much of the literature on biopolitical security. Political geography research has highlighted the limitations of this approach by attending to the uneven materialization of biopolitical governance logics across different spaces and times (Bryan, 2015; Coleman & Grove, 2009; Davies & Isakjee, 2015; Li, 2010; Martin, 2015; Minca, 2015). In particular, much of this work has engaged and critiqued Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) work on biopolitics (which both draws on and departs from that of Foucault) and his theorization of the “camp” as the “political space of modernity itself” (174). Among other contributions, this work pushes against a tendency in Agamben’s own work to emphasize the transhistorical and transspatial effects of biopower, instead demonstrating the historical and geographical particularities of different camp spatial formations, or “campsapes” (Martin, 2015), and their attendant technologies.

This article contributes to this project of historicizing and spatializing accounts of contemporary biopolitics by examining how

biopolitical rationalities are materializing in United States geopolitical strategy through the Africa Command, and specifically its practices in the Sahara-Sahel region. Drawing on interview-based research<sup>1</sup> conducted at AFRICOM headquarters and in Mali and Niger, I show that AFRICOM’s focus – consistent with military-wide strategic doctrine – is on what the military terms “shaping” (and strategists informally termed “playing the away game”). Shaping is premised on US military forces having access to global space to gather intelligence and target interventions (ranging from surveillance activities, to aid distribution, to military exercises, to operations to capture or kill targets) to affect how potentially threatening conditions develop. The principle object of shaping is the broader “security environment,” which, for the strategist, means the material, ecological, and human context in which threats to the United States and its ‘interests’ might emerge. As I elaborate below, in relation to the security environment as a whole and the capacity of AFRICOM interventions to shape it, producing effects on populations’ ways of life is of negligible importance. Contrary to hypotheses that a general “securitization” of conditions of poverty or conflict expose vulnerable populations to outside intervention to reorder life, I suggest that interventions to “shape” a “global security environment” more commonly situate so-called ‘underdeveloped’ populations as superfluous to global security conditions. These findings overlap with similar arguments made by Duffield (2010, 2011) and Chandler (2012, 2015, 2016) that global biopolitical security practice – particularly that which is promoting “resilience” – is not broadly interventionist, but rather correlates with a withdrawal from more population-centric development investments. They also resonate with recent research on “surplus populations” (Li, 2010; Tyner, 2013).

I suggest that these findings can inform a revision of dominant hypotheses about contemporary biopolitical security strategies. I formulate this revision in conversation with Foucault’s own hypotheses articulated in his *Security, Territory, Population* lectures. Specifically, I find that his concepts of “the people” and the “*milieu*” – both of which emerge out of an analysis of French urban planning – are particularly relevant to interpreting contemporary global security strategies, including those articulated within AFRICOM analyses and policies. Both of these concepts help hypothesize the ways in which biopolitical security functions to differentiate and exclude bodies and spaces in relation to the life that must be defended.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, I briefly elaborate on Foucault’s account of how biopolitical security materializes particular “fields of intervention” (*milieux*) that situate spaces and populations in different relationships to security. Second, I discuss how post Cold War US security doctrine deploys biopolitical security logics in its articulation of a strategy of global ‘shaping.’ Finally, I show how this shaping strategy has been extended to African spaces in the context of US counter-terrorism policies after 2001, focusing in particular on AFRICOM strategy and practice in the Sahara-Sahel. My findings suggest that (unlike in the urban and national contexts that Foucault analyzed), biopolitical security strategies at the global scale are characterized by varying degrees of distance between the way(s) of life they aim to defend and what Foucault termed the “field of intervention” or “*milieu*” that they target. This highlights the importance of attending not only to the

<sup>1</sup> I conducted over 100 not for attribution interviews between 2013 and 2014 with AFRICOM strategists and advisers at AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany; journalists, academics, policy advisers, and US Embassy personnel in Bamako, Mali and Niamey, Niger; and civil servants, refugees and internally displaced persons from northern Mali in Bamako, Mopti and Sevaré, Mali and Niamey, Niger.

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