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Biden sends US troops back into Somalia

The Biden administration has ordered the redeployment of 450 US soldiers to Somalia at the request of the Pentagon. Government officials state the decision is aimed at countering the advances of the Islamist group al-Shabab, which controls much of the countryside in southern and central Somalia.



US Marines at Baledogle Military Airfield in Somalia in 2020 (Credit: Cpl. Patrick Crosley)

Biden's decision is a reversal of a Trump administration order to remove 700 US soldiers from the country and deploy them to neighboring countries in January 2021. Trump portrayed the action as part of his campaign promise to roll back US involvement in

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“forever wars,” though US troops continued to conduct military activities inside of Somalia from their new bases in neighboring Kenya and Djibouti.

The stated goal of the redeployment is to target a dozen leaders of al-Shabab, which is considered a terrorist organization by the US government, and to “maximize the safety and effectiveness of our forces and enable them to provide more efficient support to our partners,” according to Adrienne Watson, a spokesperson for the National Security Council in an interview with the *New York Times*.

Al-Shabab has been engaged in military confrontations with the central Somali government for over 15 years and has been the target of repeated US military operations and airstrikes. Having consolidated control over large parts of the country, the organization is believed to have 5,000 to 10,000 armed fighters and close ties to Al Qaeda.

Several deadly bombings have been linked to the group, including a truck bombing in the capital Mogadishu in 2017 that killed at least 587 people.

Capitalizing on the violent tactics and Islamist ideology of al-Shabab and other groups, the United States has used the threat of terrorism to justify military involvement in the impoverished East African country for 30 years. According to CNN, a senior Biden administration official argued that al-Shabab had the “intent and capability to target Americans.”

However, it should be noted such concern for the safety of American citizens was not shown to the Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, a dual US and Palestinian citizen assassinated by Israeli forces last week.

The United States has been militarily involved in Somalia since 1992 when it ostensibly deployed troops to protect United Nations aid workers. George H. W. Bush deployed 25,000 US troops to the country that had descended into fierce conflict between rival clans after the overthrow of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre.

The Bush and Clinton administrations understood the strategic importance of Somalia for controlling trade through the Suez Canal and Red Sea. Up to \$700 billion in maritime shipping passes by Somalia every year, encompassing nearly all trade between Europe and Asia. Seeking to establish US control over the region amid the collapse of the Soviet

Union in 1991, the US imperialism sought to impose its domination through military force.

The campaign resulted in disaster, however, when the Battle of Mogadishu ended in the deaths of 19 US soldiers and hundreds of Somalis, including civilians, in October 1993. Better known as the “Black Hawk Down” incident, the failure of the US to control local warlords resulted in a drawback of direct US involvement.

For the next 15 years US imperialism took on a reserved role in Somali politics. However, the rise of al-Shabab in the mid-2000s prompted the US to steadily increase its military involvement throughout the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations. Obama authorized multiple airstrikes against top al-Shabab leaders and the Trump administration increased troop deployments up to 700 soldiers before announcing his plan to withdraw them.

Significantly, reporting of Biden’s decision corresponds with the election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as president of Somalia, who was sworn in this Monday.

Returning for a second term after his previous term from 2012 to 2017, Mohamud’s election ends a 15 month period of crisis after outgoing President Mohamed Abdulahi Farmaajo attempted to extend his term by two years, throwing the country into further violent clashes between rival clans and political groups.

Farmaajo was defeated by Mohamud by a vote of 110 to 214 in the legislature. Somalia’s elections do not include the 15 million people who live in the country. Instead, clan elders select delegates to represent them in parliamentary elections. The parliament then elects the president itself without any direct input from the general populace. Effectively, only 101 people have the right to vote in federal elections.

Mohamud is a member of the Hawiye, one of the five largest and most politically influential clans in Somalia. He also leads the Union for Peace and Development Party, which currently controls a majority in both legislative chambers, securing his victory.

In an insult to the very concept of democracy, the US State Department issued a statement congratulating “the people of Somalia on the conclusion of their national electoral process.” It continued by congratulating Mohamud on his election and encouraged him to

“prioritize strengthening democratic governance and institutions.” How Mohamud is supposed to strengthen something that does not exist is unclear.

Despite claiming to be defending democracy in Ukraine, the United States is not concerned with democracy in Somalia as long as its leaders are beholden to its imperialist aims. Mohamud was voted out of office in 2017 due to the intense levels of corruption and political infighting. Despite this, his return to office was facilitated by the United States, which took action to sanction Somali officials by restricting visas on the grounds that they were “undermining the democratic process in the country.”

International donors also threatened to withdraw \$400 million in loans from the International Monetary Fund unless Farmaajo ceased his efforts to stall new elections.

The US now has its favored puppet, but it will not solve the intense social crisis in Somalia. Severe drought and decades of war have displaced hundreds of thousands and left 6 million people in acute food insecurity, including 1.4 million children. The US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine has worsened the situation in Somalia, which relies on exports from both countries for 90 percent of its wheat supply.

Such conditions are what allow al-Shabab to persist, even thrive, despite regular attacks by the US, Somali government and African Union forces.

Al-Shabab has consolidated its power to operate effectively as its own state. It collects taxes, runs its own courts, organized a COVID-19 medical care site and has even issued a ban on single-use plastic bags in areas it occupies. According to Omar Mahmood, a senior Somalia analyst at the International Crisis Group, al-Shabab is now often capable of “providing services that are more competitive than the federal government.”

The fact that US imperialism is not concerned with even attempting to alleviate these conditions is shown by the fact that three successive administrations have conducted military operations within Somalia without any clearly stated plan or end goal. Now US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is calling for a “persistent US military presence in Somalia” indicating that the US does not intend to leave anytime soon.

The ultimate goal of the US is to strengthen its hold on the geostrategic region in its pursuit of a confrontation with China. Should war with China break out, the US could use

Somalia as a chokepoint for shutting down Chinese trade through the Suez Canal to Europe. The claims of countering al-Shabab is merely conducive to this end.

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