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The Kenyan Massacre's Roots in America's Somalia Policy

by Sheldon Richman

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Last weekend's hostage-taking — and the murder of at least 62 people — at the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, has its roots in the U.S. government's intervention in Somalia, which began in the 1990s. Although there is no justification for killing innocents, it is fair to point out that al-Shabaab, the Islamist group that committed the attack on the mall and that controls parts of Somalia, would probably not be in power if not for the United States.

As Scott Horton, host of a nationwide radio program focusing on foreign policy, points out in the September issue of *Future of Freedom* (which I edit), the U.S. government has intervened directly in Somalia and backed repeated invasions by neighboring African states, including Kenya. In the process, a relatively moderate government was overthrown, resistance to invaders was radicalized, and the al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabaab gained partial control, which would have been unlikely without that intervention.

Horton, drawing on firsthand reporting by journalist [Jeremy Scahill](#), notes that after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Bush administration compiled a list of countries “ripe for ‘regime change,’” including Somalia, “none of which had any involvement whatsoever in the attacks or any real ties to those who did.... Luckily for the Pentagon and CIA, it was not very difficult to find cutthroat warlords willing to accept their cash to carry out targeted assassinations and kidnappings against those they accused of being Islamists — or anyone else they felt like targeting.”

A backlash followed. Somalia's Islamic Courts Union, a coalition of a dozen groups, put down the warlords and the U.S.-sponsored Transitional Federal Government. "The ICU then declared the reign of Islamic law," Horton writes. "That, of course, was none of America's business, and even if it had been, the Somali regime lacked the power to create an authoritarian religious state like, say, U.S. ally Saudi Arabia.... And Somalia's traditional Muslim beliefs were much more laid-back and tolerant than those in Arabia."

This was unacceptable to the Bush administration, so in late 2006 it had Ethiopia, its Christian client state and an old Somalia antagonist, invade and overthrow the ICU, "with CIA and special-operations officers leading the attack." In 2008, however, Somalis kicked the Ethiopians out. Helping in the effort was, in Horton's words, "the youngest and least influential group in the ICU, al-Shabaab ('the youth')." On its way out of power the Bush administration, seeking to save face, got the "old men of the ICU" to agree to "accept the form of the Transitional Federal Government." This only inflamed al-Shabaab, which accused them of being American agents.

"It was only then — years after the whole mess began — that it declared loyalty to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda. It started acting like al-Qaeda too, implementing Arabian-style laws and punishments in the areas they dominated, such as cutting off the hands of those accused of stealing," Horton writes.

Unfortunately, the Obama team has continued along the same disastrous path:

After the Ethiopians withdrew, [the administration] sent in the armies of Uganda and Burundi under the auspices of the African Union to hunt down and destroy al-Shabaab. Then came the Kenyans, who apparently panicked after luxury resorts near their border had come under attack. In 2011 the Ethiopians reinvaded. Kenyan forces took the port city of Kismayo from al-Shabaab in 2012 and loudly declared victory when the rebels melted away. But the stubborn insurgency continues the fight.

The Americans, for their part, continue to back the invading forces, as well as what passes for the "government" in Mogadishu, with hundreds of tons of weapons and tens of millions of dollars.

The CIA and the U.S. military still take a direct hand, not only by helping the nominal government, but also by attacking Somalis with helicopters, cruise missiles, and drones — and, Horton writes, "by overseeing at least two different torture dungeons."

The horrendous attack in Nairobi has the news media abuzz over possible terrorist threats to "soft targets" such as shopping malls, not only in Africa but also in the United States itself. As we think about this, we should realize that this is a threat made in Washington, DC.

How many times do we have to experience what the CIA calls "blowback" before the American people cry, "Enough!"