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Is Al-Shabab Trying to Pull the US Into A Military Quagmire in Africa?

By John Glaser

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In a discussion on NPR's Morning Edition yesterday, host Steve Inskeep asked Bronwyn Bruton, deputy director of the Atlantic Council's Africa Center, an important question regarding the massacre in Kenya by the Somali terrorist group al-Shabab:

INSKEEP: Is there a danger here for the United States, because perhaps one of the reasons – if you're a terror group – that you would mount an attack like this in the shopping mall, is to suck in the United States in some way.

BRUTON: Absolutely, that was their goal in Somalia. Certainly it was al-Qaida's goal in Somalia to attempt to draw the U.S. into yet another quagmire, it didn't succeed. But they will certainly attempt to draw the U.S. into Nairobi. The United States will certainly feel pressure to assist and respond.

Victims are still being pulled from the rubble in Nairobi, Kenya, but a more involved U.S. response is already becoming apparent. Over at *The American Interest*, Walter Russell Mead writes that "last weekend's terror attack in Kenya appears to be boosting chances that U.S. engagement in Africa will grow." Mead cites a *Wall Street Journal* report that the terrorist attacks in Kenya, and in Nigeria before that, "could speed up U.S. engagement in the continent's terrorism problems."

Before considering the potential for the U.S. to get sucked into a quagmire in East Africa, it's important to know just how involved the U.S. has been up to this point. About a year ago, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the U.S. was "heavily engaged" in Somalia, "[o]nly this time, African troops are doing the fighting and dying. The United States is doing almost everything else."

The U.S. has been quietly equipping and training thousands of African soldiers to wage a widening proxy war against the Shabab, the Al Qaeda ally that has imposed a harsh form of Islamic rule on southern Somalia and sparked alarm in Washington as foreign militants join its ranks.

Officially, the troops are under the auspices of the African Union. But, in truth, according to interviews by U.S. and African officials and senior military officers and budget documents, the 15,000-strong force pulled from five African countries is largely a creation of the State Department and Pentagon, trained and supplied by the U.S. government and guided by dozens of retired foreign military personnel hired through private contractors.

This strategy of encouraging regional African nations to conduct war on Somalia isn't new. Close observers will remember the Bush administration backed Ethiopia's 2006 invasion [5] of Somalia to depose the Islamic Courts Union, with unflattering consequences.

And keep in mind, these African governments the U.S. is bankrolling to fight a proxy war in Somalia are no peacekeepers.

Kenya, for example, "has been one of the largest recipients of U.S. State Department Anti-Terrorism Assistance (ATA) in the world" writes Jonathan Horowitz at *Foreign Policy*, despite the fact that this assistance has been "aiding and abetting human rights violations," like "detainee abuse, denial of fair trial guarantees, extrajudicial killings, or unlawful extraditions."

"Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta faces a trial in the International Criminal Court for backing ethnic violence that left hundreds dead in late 2007," the *Wall Street Journal* reports. "The charges, which he denies, have added an awkwardness to the U.S. relationship."

There is a similar story for Uganda. In 2011, President Obama sent more than 100 combat troops to Uganda to help Ugandan security forces with domestic security, essentially as a bribe to keep Ugandan military forces in the proxy war in Somalia. Since the troop deployment and the increases in aid and military assistance, the Ugandan regime has been "increasingly placing illegitimate restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly to silence critical voices," according to Amnesty International.

So one part of the U.S.'s involvement in Somalia has been to send money, weapons, and training to accuse war criminals so they can attack Somalia on Washington's behalf. The other part is a more direct, covert war.

In a number of articles in 2011, *The Nation*'s Jeremy Scahill uncovered Obama's covert war in Somalia, which included secret prisons run by CIA proxies, harsh interrogations, and the funding

and training of unscrupulous militants many of whom were former (and current?) warlords. The "counter-terrorism" effort in Somalia also included "targeted strikes by U.S. Special Operations forces, drone attacks and expanded surveillance operations."

Scahill noted "U.S. policy on Somalia [since "Black Hawk Down"] has been marked by neglect, miscalculation and failed attempts to use warlords to build indigenous counterterrorism capacity, many of which have backfired dramatically."

It was important that these interventions were secret, kept from Congress, the American people, and the international community. One of the reasons for that was revealed when, in 2012, the UN Security Council Committee Chairman issued a letter warning against the increased use of drones over the skies of Somalia, saying such actions may violate international law.

So the U.S. has been deeply involved in destabilizing Somalia for decades and such policies have intensified in the past few years under Obama. Given the rather obvious failure of these policies (Scahill argues "U.S. policy has strengthened the hand of the very groups it purports to oppose and inadvertently aided the rise of militant groups, including the Shabab"), will Washington cut its losses or double down?

It's hard to say. For all Obama's faults, he has been acutely cautious of getting into another boots-on-the-ground quagmire in yet another Muslim country. But al-Qaeda, which is formally linked with al-Shabab, has been quite successful in their attempts to draw superpowers into bloody, expensive and seemingly endless wars. They did it to us in Afghanistan and we're *still* there 12 years later.