

## *The Costs of War in Somalia*

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Although the United States has not formally declared war in Somalia and the US Congress has not formally approved US military engagements in Somalia, US intervention in Somalia has rapidly expanded under the Trump Administration. US airstrikes against the Somali terrorist group known as Al-Shabaab have skyrocketed, from between 15 and 21 drone strikes and other covert operations in Somalia during the period from 2007-2014 to a record high of 46 strikes in 2018 alone, which killed 326 people, to an astonishing 24 strikes in just the first two months of 2019, killing at least 252 people. Recent reports suggest other entities, such as the CIA, are also carrying out an unknown number of additional airstrikes, and the US currently has about 500 troops, mostly Special Operations, stationed in Somalia. According to a recent investigation by Amnesty International and a subsequent review by AFRICOM, the United States Africa Command, some of the US airstrikes have killed civilians. Tens of thousands of Somalis have fled areas targeted by air strikes, crowding into miserable displaced persons camps outside Mogadishu. Civilians who have lost family members or been injured by strikes have no recourse, and there is no accountability for those carrying out the strikes. In short, without a formal declaration or any particular acknowledgement or interest from the US Congress, a war is being waged in Somalia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Reports include Schmitt, Eric and Charlie Savage. 2019. "Trump Administration Steps Up Air War in Somalia." New York Times. March 10; New America Foundation. N.d. "America's Counterterrorism Wars: Drone Strikes: Somalia." Available at <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/americas-counterterrorism-wars/somalia/>; Sperber, Amanda. 2019. Inside the Secretive U.S. Air Campaign in Somalia." The Nation. Feb 7. Available at <https://www.thenation.com/article/somalia-secret-air-campaign/>; Amnesty International. 2019. "The Hidden US War in Somalia: Civilian Casualties from Air Strikes in Lower Shabelle." March; Bureau of Investigative Journalism. N.d. Somalia: Reported U.S. Covert Operations 2001-2016. Available at <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/somalia-reported-us-covert-actions-2001-2017>; and Serle, Jack and Abigail Fielding-Smith. 2015. "US Drone War: 2014 in Numbers." The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. January 4. Available at <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/2015/01/07/us-drone-war-2014-in-numbers/>. Accessed 28 July 2015.

This war is being waged against the terrorist group Al-Shabaab with little consideration for that group's tight connection to Somalia's security economy, a national economy in which the flow of aid, weapons, and trade connects Al-Shabaab to Somalia's political and business elite. Because of these connections, the cost of US military intervention in Somalia is disproportionately borne by Somali civilians even as its ability to contain Al-Shabaab over the long term is dubious.

US intervention in Somalia through amplified airstrikes marks a new effort to confront Al-Shabaab. While the airstrikes are a response to US concerns about Islamist terrorists in Africa and foreign policy priorities evidenced in the War on Terror, they also are an extension of the long sorry history of US military intervention in Somalia. This history has been characterized by blunders, errors, atrocities, impunity, collusion, corruption, and a very high toll on Somali civilians. US intervention in Somalia over the past four decades has contributed to violent destabilization and political dysfunction, refugee outflows and the growth of terrorist networks. This paper reviews some of this recent history and argues that the current war against Al-Shabaab is predicated on a misreading of the context in which the terrorist group operates. Al-Shabaab is not just a terrorist group in the sense of a group that commits violence against civilians - it is also a resistance movement against foreign intervention that operates in collusion with the government, business interests, Somali National Security Forces, AMISOM and regional entities. Thus Al-Shabaab is fueled, in part, by the US war against it. And those who pay the ultimate price for this mistaken war are innocent Somali civilians, themselves oppressed by Al-Shabaab.

### ***Background<sup>3</sup>***

US interventions in Somalia over the past several decades have been characterized by blunders, misreadings of the local context, and violent resistance, including the rise of Al-Shabaab as a militia group founded to protest intervention in Somalia by foreign interests.

When Somalia's dictator Siad Barre switched sides in the Cold War in 1977, the US government poured economic and military support to its new ally. Somalia became the second largest recipient of US funding in Africa and built the continent's largest army, which Barre increasingly turned against his own civilians in a bid to retain power. In 1990, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the US Congress acknowledged Barre's record of human rights abuses and voted to withhold further funding for his government, which collapsed within a month. Various militia groups then fought each other to claim control over the state. The number of people displaced during the 1991-1993 civil war tells a grave story of the after-effects of US military support for a brutal dictator: nearly one million people fled Somalia for

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<sup>3</sup> This section is drawn from Besteman, Catherine. 2017. "Experimenting in Somalia: The New Security Empire." *Anthropological Theory* 17 (3):404-420.

Ethiopia, Yemen, Djibouti and Kenya, about two million were internally displaced, and at least a quarter million died.<sup>4</sup>

US intervention took various forms over the subsequent two and a half decades, beginning with a boots-on-the-ground intervention in the early 1990s with a UN coalition led by the US military to establish security and deliver humanitarian aid. The UN Mission marked the first time in its history that the UN Security Council approved a humanitarian intervention involving military force in a sovereign state. It was also the first international effort to wed humanitarian and military intervention. By mid-1993, the intervention turned toward “nation-building” and had become the largest UN operation in the world with 30,000 personnel and an annual cost of US \$1.5 billion.<sup>5</sup>

One of Somalia’s most powerful militia leaders, General Aideed, routed US involvement in the international coalition with the October 1993 Black Hawk Down incident. Eighteen elite US troops lost their lives in a gun battle after Somalis shot down their helicopter during an operation intended to capture leaders in General Aideed’s militia. The debacle led the US to withdraw its troops and chilled the American appetite for military intervention in the name of humanitarianism. Two years later the UN forces also withdrew, leaving Somalia still stateless after three years and billions of dollars spent on state-building foreign interventions. Of this era, BBC Africa editor Mary Harper concludes, “The US/UN military intervention of the 1990s [...] represented the archetypal wrong-headed exercise in building a state with foreign soldiers and good intentions; the more recent examples of Iraq and Afghanistan suggest lessons from this fiasco still have not been learned”.<sup>6</sup>

Over the following decade, the UN, African Union, and European Union sponsored almost 20 peace conferences to reestablish a central government in Somalia, a process derided by Harper as a growth industry focused on peace talks to install a recognizable central government with no relationship to the actual political context in Somalia of ongoing militia activity, a patchwork of local and militia authorities, and no national government presence.<sup>7</sup>

It was only after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US that the US resumed military activities in Somalia. In the wake of 9/11, US security panics identified Somalia’s ongoing statelessness as offering a potential opportunity for terrorists. During 2001-2005 the US began collaborating with local militias to capture suspected Al-Qaeda members in Mogadishu, by-passing the internationally funded

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<sup>4</sup> Hammond, Laura. 2013 “History, Overview, Trends and Issues in Major Somali Refugee Displacements in the Near Region (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Yemen.” *Bildhaan* 13: 55-79.

<sup>5</sup> Harper, Mary 2012. *Getting Somalia Wrong? Faith, War and Hope in a Shattered State*. London: Zed Books.

<sup>6</sup> Harper, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Harper, 2012.

and installed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) that had been established in 2004. The contestations between the TFG, US-supported militias, and the anti-TFG Islamic Courts Union (ICU), an Islamist movement, resulted in the ICU taking power and establishing control over most of south-central Somalia.

Fearing its Islamic orientation might support terrorism, in 2006 the US supported an Ethiopian invasion to overthrow the Islamic Courts Union and reestablish the TFG. Claiming self-protection against terrorism and in direct contravention of international refugee law, Kenya, which also borders Somalia, temporarily closed its border to fleeing civilians in January 2007. The Ethiopian invasion, in which the US was an important player, “served as a rallying point for the emerging Al-Shabaab movement,” a militant movement that defined itself in opposition to foreign intervention.<sup>8</sup> The Al-Shabaab militia gained strength and power because of Somalis’ rage against the Ethiopian invasion and opposition to a government seen as established by foreign interests, enabling the rise of a terrorist organization where none had existed before. Al-Shabaab’s increasingly violent tactics of civilian control included forced conscription, a prohibition on mobility, torture, and assassination, constraining the ability of civilians living within the zones controlled by Al-Shabaab to manage a stressful drought. As Al-Shabaab attacks expanded and people began fleeing, in 2007 the UN approved the creation of an African Union force known as AMISOM to support the TFG government against Al-Shabaab. AMISOM’s initial mandate was for six months, which has now stretched to thirteen years, as AMISOM is still present in the country today.

Over the next two years, fighting between Al-Shabaab and the foreign-backed TFG government produced massive conflict that displaced almost a million people. By 2009, Somalia was more insecure than ever before. TFG forces (funded by the UN), Al-Shabaab, and criminal gangs all preyed on residents throughout the country, and Al-Shabaab responded to its designation as a terrorist group by the US with a pledge to target Western operations within and outside of Somalia and by joining Al Qaeda in 2010. Commentators argue that although US foreign policy toward Somalia after 9/11 was oriented toward quashing terrorism, it in fact *enabled* Al-Shabaab to emerge as an effective anti-Western terrorist group. “In some ways,” Harper writes, “US-led policy towards the ICU created the very thing it aimed to destroy; its actions helped to radicalize the movement”.<sup>9</sup>

The state of massive insecurity carried an enormous impact for Somali people, especially in conjunction with famine during 2009-2011. Al-Shabaab attacked refugees in an effort to keep them from fleeing the country, and the government tried to pull people toward areas it controlled near Mogadishu.<sup>10</sup> By the

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<sup>8</sup> Hammond, 2013; 63.

<sup>9</sup> Harper, 2012; 66.

<sup>10</sup> Hammond, 2013; 63.

middle of 2012, the number of IDP's living in Mogadishu had swelled by 40 percent from the previous year, to 368,288;<sup>11</sup>

The result of these combined factors was massive displacement within the region: 113,500 new arrivals were registered in the Dadaab camps between January and August 2011. In Ethiopia, which had been hosting 40,000 refugees in two camps near Dolo Ado during 2009 - 2010, 100,000 new arrivals were recorded. (Smaller numbers were being sheltered in camps near the city of Jijiga in the east.) A nutritional assessment of the Dolo Ado camps in Ethiopia cited early surveys among the new arrivals showing global acute malnutrition (GAM) rates of 50% (15% is considered indicative of a serious emergency) and severe acute malnutrition (SAM) rates of approximately 23%. Mortality rates for children under five were twice the level indicating an emergency, at 4/10,000/day. These indicators show how severely weakened the population was when it arrived in the camps.<sup>12</sup>

By 2014, the foreign-funded Somali government, protected by African Union troops, controlled "roughly thirty square miles of territory in Mogadishu," leaving the rest outside government control.<sup>13</sup>

### **Current US Military Intervention**

The current goal of US policy in Somalia is explicitly to attack and disable Al-Shabaab, which has successfully launched attacks of mass terror within Somalia against foreign intervention as well as in Kenya, and Uganda, in retaliation for those country's military interventions and their contributions to AMISOM.<sup>14</sup> Current US military policy in Africa is based on a claim of "African solutions for African problems," which means that US resources are used to train Somali National Security Forces and to support AMISOM and its over 22,000 uniformed personnel in their fight against Al-Shabaab. In the shift from the boots-on-the-ground intervention that characterized US intervention in the early 1990s, US military involvement in Somalia since 9/11 thus turned toward secretive operations, private security contractors, foreign mercenaries, military proxies and drone strikes. The US contracts private security firms that pay former soldiers from France, South Africa, and Scandinavia to provide African Union troops with training in urban warfare, the CIA built a base for secret interrogations in Mogadishu of suspected terrorists

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<sup>11</sup> Hammond, 2013; 63.

<sup>12</sup> Hammond, 2013; 64.

<sup>13</sup> Scahill, Jeremy 2014. "The CIA's Secret Sites in Somalia." *The Nation*, August 1-8.

Schmitt, Eric and Charlie Savage. 2019. "Trump Administration Steps Up Air War in Somalia." *New York Times*. March 10.

<sup>14</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. Nd. "Al Shabaab in Somalia." Available at

<https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/al-shabab-in-somalia>

rendered from Somalia and abroad, and US covert operations and drone attacks target suspected Al-Shabaab members.<sup>15</sup>

The financial costs of waging a non-war in Somalia include the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars per year by foreign governments to support AMISOM, including over a billion from the EU from 2007-2016<sup>16</sup> and almost a billion by the US since 2007, in addition to \$720 million for the UN office that assists the army.<sup>17</sup> International funding for AMISOM rose from \$350 million in 2007 to \$900 million a year in 2016.<sup>18</sup> The funding total for US operations in Somalia, including the airstrikes, is unknown.

Additionally, the US provides military aid to Kenya and Ethiopia to support their counter-insurgency efforts, such as the US drone attacks that accompanied Kenya's incursions against Al-Shabaab in southern Somalia in October 2011, as well as offering material and rhetorical support for internal security policies against Somalis living within their borders.<sup>19</sup> "Recent US gestures to help Kenya play its regional role include increased military training programs, inclusion in regional military drills, and the sale of 12 new US-made light attack helicopters, 24 heavy machine gun pods and accompanying systems, 24 rocket pods and some 4,000 M151 high-explosive rockets," reports political analyst Allison Fedirka.<sup>20</sup>

US military policy in Somalia is based on a presumption that Al-Shabaab is a terrorist group that must be confronted through counterinsurgency tactics of the US-led Global War on Terror. But this policy ignores the fact that Al-Shabaab operates with and through connections to the government, business interests, Somali National Security Forces, AMISOM and regional entities. Al-Shabaab claims authority over vast regions of central-southern Somalia, reportedly relying on foreigners with experience fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, on Somalis in the

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<sup>15</sup> Gettelman, Jeffrey, Mark Mazzetti and Eric Schmitt 2011. "U.S. Relies on Contractors in Somalia Conflict." *New York Times*, August 10.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, Paul D. 2017a. "Paying for AMISOM: Are Politics and Bureaucracy Undermining the AU's Largest Peace Operation?" Global Observatory. January 11. Available at <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/01/amisom-african-union-peacekeeping-financing/>.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, Paul D. 2017b. "A Navy SEAL Was Killed In Somalia: Here's What You Need to Know About U.S. Operations in Somalia." *Washington Post*, May 8.; Sperber, Amanda. 2018. "Somalia is a Country Without an Army." *Foreign Policy*. August 7.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, Paul D. 2017a. "Paying for AMISOM: Are Politics and Bureaucracy Undermining the AU's Largest Peace Operation?" Global Observatory. January 11. Available at <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/01/amisom-african-union-peacekeeping-financing/>;

Anoba claims that over \$55 billion has been spent on foreign aid to Somalia since 1991, and the U.S. Department of State (2018) says the U.S. alone has spent \$3.2 billion from the U.S. since 2006 for "humanitarian assistance." Anoba, Ibrahim. 2017. "How Foreign Aid Hurts Famine Relief in Somalia." Foundation for Economic Education. May 24. Available at <https://fee.org/articles/how-foreign-aid-hurts-famine-relief-in-somalia/>

<sup>19</sup> Glück, Zoltán. 2019. *Recolonizing Security: An Anthropology of the War on Terror in Kenya*. PhD Dissertation, CUNY.

<sup>20</sup> Fedirka, Allison. 2017. "Why the US Cares About Somalia." *Geopolitical Futures*. May 10. Available at <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/us-cares-somalia/>.

diaspora for expertise and tactical assistance,<sup>21</sup> and on networks and connections with Somali politicians, businesspeople and military personnel, AMISOM personnel and others outside the country. It relies on exporting charcoal and sugar through the port in Kismayo, with the collusion of the regional government, to raise tens of millions of dollars, despite a UN ban on such exports.<sup>22</sup> A recent report claims that members of the Somali National Army and its US-trained elite force, Danab, provide the US with incorrect information about Al-Shabaab's location to minimize the impact of drone strikes on the organization.<sup>23</sup>

As Kenneth Menkhaus,<sup>24</sup> one of Somalia's most respected political analysts, explains, Somalia's political economic system is characterized by "routinized rules of the game on the use of political violence" shared by Al-Shabaab, politicians, businesspeople, and clan leaders allying and vying with each other for ascendance and appropriation of resources. Menkhaus explains that this system is:

[A] network of networks [...] a set of competing mafias and cartels that make use of political violence when they see fit. It is also characterized by very high levels of collusion [...] The fight against Al-Shabaab has to be put in the context of Al-Shabaab often colluding with the very parties that we think are fighting it. Al-Shabaab has very effectively penetrated those other entities, whether it's AMISOM or the Somali government or regional member states. It has done a very effective job of creating insecurity and then providing the means to protect you from it, which is another way to say it is a very good extortion racket.

In other words, like a mafia, Al-Shabaab wages violence and then demands payment and collusion in exchange for its protection against that very violence.

Furthermore, Somali politicians benefit from using the threat of Al-Shabaab to extend authoritarian practices and to form partnerships with foreign funders who provide military support. Transparency International named Somalia's government the most corrupt in the world in 2018 due to the personal appropriation of foreign assistance by politicians and businesspeople.<sup>25</sup> Many

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<sup>21</sup> Shinn, David. 2000. "Al Shabaab's Foreign Threat to Somalia." *Orbis* 55(2): 203-215.

<sup>22</sup> Felter, Claire, Jonathan Masters, and Mohammed Aly Sergie. 2019. "Al-Shabaab." Council on Foreign Relations, January 31. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/al-shabab>;

<sup>23</sup> Van Lehman, Daniel and Lindsay J. Benstead. 2019. "Protecting Somali Minorities is Good Military Strategy." *Lobelog*, June 19. Available at: <https://lobelog.com/protecting-somali-minorities-is-good-military-strategy/>

<sup>24</sup> Menkhaus, Kenneth 2018. "Somalia: Resolving the Crisis and Sustaining Peace" Panel Discussion. ODI. March 14 2018. Available at: <https://www.odi.org/events/4545-somalia-resolving-crisis-and-sustaining-peace>.

<sup>25</sup> Transparency International. 2018. "Corruption Perceptions Index 2017." 21 February. Available at [https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption\\_perceptions\\_index\\_2017](https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017).



Somalis are of course unhappy with the extent of violence, insecurity, and corruption, but recognize the system for what it is: a collusion among the powerful and the armed that creates insecurity while offering a certain degree of protection to those who understand or are part of the system.

While some people in Somalia may thus benefit from their association with Al-Shabaab, those most harmed may be minority farmers in southern Somalia – Al-Shabaab’s stronghold - who live under Al-Shabaab’s rule and who are disproportionately subject to extortion and kidnapping.<sup>26</sup> Al-Shabaab extorts their harvests, money, and labor while operating in alliance with dominant clans in the area who Al-Shabaab does not subject to similar levels of expropriation. Lacking militias of their own which might bring them negotiating power, Somalia’s rural southern population is caught between figuring out how to live within Al-Shabaab’s rules of expropriation and control and avoiding US airstrikes. Because the US reportedly uses the criteria of “age, gender, location, and geographical proximity to Al-Shabaab”<sup>27</sup> for targeting terrorists, in effect all military age men within Al-Shabaab territory are at risk. US military intervention has made life much more, rather than less, insecure for Somali civilians.

The human costs of the undeclared war in Somalia since 2007 include the internal displacement of hundreds of thousands and the creation of large displaced persons camps throughout the country; the ongoing containment of over a quarter million Somali refugees in Kenyan refugee camps; additional displaced Somalis in camps in other countries; and four million people in Somalia in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>28</sup> There have been an estimated several thousand African Union casualties,<sup>29</sup> and an unknown number of civilian casualties. Amnesty International suggests the US may have committed war crimes because of the (at a minimum) 14 civilian deaths from US airstrikes that they have documented to date. Finally, part of the human cost is also the widespread terror that Somalis experience as a result of ongoing US airstrikes.

### **Conclusion: Costs of War in Somalia**

In sum, the political costs of US interventions in Somalia post-9/11 include the creation and expansion of Al-Shabaab as an effective organ of terror in the Horn of Africa, with international connections to Al-Qaeda. Foreign military intervention has not ameliorated the impact of Al-Shabaab activities, and, if anything, has

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<sup>26</sup> Besteman, Catherine and Daniel Van Lehman. 2018. “Somalia’s Southern War: The Fight Over Land and Labor,” in M. Keating and M. Waldman, eds., *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict, and Al-Shabaab*, London: Hurst and Co.

<sup>27</sup> Amnesty International. 2019. “The Hidden US War in Somalia: Civilian Casualties from Air Strikes in Lower Shabelle.” March.

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR n.d. “Kenya: Figures at a Glance.” Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/ke/figures-at-a-glance>.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson, Jane. 2018. “Trump’s Military Escalation in Somalia is Spurring Hope and Fear.” *New Yorker*, April 5.



augmented its ability to control the local population because Al-Shabaab is so tightly connected into the war economy *and benefits from it*. Along with remittances from migrants, the money coming in from the US and elsewhere for security operations against Al-Shabaab sustains the economy, and the security economy *is* the economy in Somalia.<sup>30</sup> The war is good for business and business makes profit out of war. Al-Shabaab, the government, AMISOM, Somali security forces, the business class, and dominant clans are all part of an economic system that is sustained by funds pouring into Somalia to securitize and militarize the country.

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<sup>30</sup> Ingiriis, Mohamed Haji 2018. "War Economy and Insecurity in Contemporary Mogadishu: The Violent Political Marketplace in Southern Somalia." Unpublished paper prepared for "Continuity and Change in Somali Society, Politics, and Economy in the Longue Durée" conference, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany.; Al-Bulushi, Samar. 2014. "'Peacekeeping' As Occupation: Managing the Market for Violent Labor in Somalia." *Transforming Anthropology* 22 (1): 31-37.