

Is the US preparing an invasion of Somalia?

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A series of recent press reports seek to portray the impoverished African country of Somalia as a centre of “terrorist activity” and to recommend it as the next target in the US “war against terrorism”.

Al Barakaat, the main financial organisation that Somalis living abroad use to transfer funds into the country, along with the Somalia Internet Company were closed down last month by the Bush administration. It was alleged that both were conduits for Al Qaeda funds. In a country divided by warring factions for over a decade, suffering from hyperinflation and drought, with a ban on its main export of livestock to the Middle East because of Rift Valley Fever, closing down Al Barakaat was a barbaric act. UN officials have pointed out that most Somalis are now dependent on income from relatives abroad—between \$200 to \$500 million a year was transferred to Somalia through Al Barakaat, compared to only \$60 million in international aid to the country. The resulting economic strangulation threatens to turn what was already a humanitarian disaster into mass starvation.

There are repeated suggestions that action against Somalia should be escalated into surgical strikes (euphemistically termed “stiletto attacks”) or even outright military invasion—if not by Western troops then by neighbouring Ethiopia with US backing. In the *Wall Street Journal* of November 29, an article “Post-Afghan Phase of War Takes Shape in the Wings” cites US officials saying, “Somalia may be the easiest place to take direct US military action”. Like Afghanistan it “barely has a national government, and it has few friends to protest a US intervention.” As Somalia lies on the Indian Ocean, the *Journal* adds, it “would make moving in US troops and equipment off nearby ships a lot easier” than in Afghanistan. According to a Reuters report of the same day, US, British and German warships are already patrolling the Somali coast, allegedly to stop Al Qaeda fighters fleeing from Afghanistan.

An article in Britain’s *Sunday Telegraph* December 2 states, “A team of senior British military officers who visited US Central Command in Tampa, Florida last week was asked to prepare the strategy for attacks on sites in Somalia. They have returned to London to discuss the plan with Ministry of Defence ministers and officials.”

The justification for a military assault on Somalia made in the *Wall Street Journal*, and repeated throughout the media, is that a Somali Islamic fundamentalist terror organisation called Al Itihaad Al Islamiya has links with Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

A November 4 article in the *Washington Post* was one of the first to make this claim, stating that intelligence analysts from the State Department, Pentagon, CIA and National Security Council were discussing “where and how” Al Qaeda operates in Somalia. It is

claimed (presumably based on information from the intelligence analysts, though stated as fact by the *Post*) that:

- * Al Itihaad is the local “affiliate” or “ally” of Al Qaeda

- * Bin Laden sent several top lieutenants to provide assistance to the “warlord” Mohammed Aided in 1993, and that Aided’s forces killed 18 US Army troops serving in a United Nations military force

- * Al Qaeda members continued to use Somalia as a regional base, including preparations for the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania

- * Officials from neighbouring Ethiopia state that Al Itihaad, backed by Al Qaeda, is attempting to take over the semi-autonomous region in the north of Somalia called Puntland

Various additions have been made since. For example, in the British *Sunday Times* of November 25 it was stated that Al Itihaad was linked to Muhammad Atef, bin Laden’s security chief who was killed in the US bombing of Afghanistan. Al Itihaad is referred to as an “aggressive local affiliate” of Al Qaeda and Somalia is said to harbour Al Qaeda operatives.

Most recently the *Sunday Telegraph* gives a new twist: “It emerged that Saddam Hussein is funding a number of terrorist training camps in Somalia used by a militant Islamic group with close ties to Al Qaeda. According to Iraqi dissident groups based in London, Saddam has agreed to provide funding, training and equipment to the Somali group Al Itihaad Al Islamiya in return for assistance from the Somali authorities in avoiding United Nations sanctions.” The *Telegraph* quotes a US official saying, “This is a significant development for Saddam. He thinks by forming alliances like this he can get rid of US forces from the region.” They also claim that Al Qaeda has several training camps in southern Somalia.

For over a month a systematic campaign of lies and black propaganda against Somalia has been developed by the US intelligence services. In attempting to brand the country as a centre for Al Qaeda terrorism, they have been supported throughout by a compliant media.

To refute the charges listed above, one must first of all be aware of the virtual absence of knowledge concerning Somalia among US intelligence officials. The November 4 *Post* article points out that the US embassy was closed in 1991 and, “Somalia today is something of a mystery to US policymakers and anti-terrorist experts.” In the *Telegraph* it is reported that British intelligence has been asked to look into Islamic groups in Somalia: “We discovered some pretty big intelligence gaps.”

No proof has been given that Al Qaeda was financed by or channelled funds through Al-Barakaat. Barakaat

telecommunications manager Abdullah Kahiye invited US officials to look through the company's books, but the invitation was rejected. (The organisation is not even based in Somalia, which it considers unsafe, but in Dubai). He told the IRIN news service: "For simple justice, I say to the Americans, please come and investigate. Don't depend on lies and rumours put about by envious competitors or others with a hidden agenda. We have nothing to hide". The response by the US Treasury was to insist that there is "very, very strong evidence", but this could not be revealed because it is based on classified information.

What completely exposes the campaign against Somalia is the material put forward by US academic Ken Menkhaus, professor at Davidson College, North Carolina. Menkhaus, a specialist on Somalia and Islamic movements, was an advisor to the UN and is now a consultant to both the UN and the US government. On November 27 he gave a presentation to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in which he makes it very clear that the claims of Al Qaeda links in Somalia have no substance.

According to Menkhaus, "With specific regard to Al Qaeda, Somalia would be 'relatively inhospitable terrain' for bin Laden's organisation. Alliances in the country are incredibly fluid, and the difficulty of keeping secrets in the country would make it difficult for Al Qaeda to operate clandestinely."

With its lack of government and extensive coastline, Menkhaus says that Somalia could be used as a "transshipment point" for terrorists, but provides no evidence of Al Qaeda operations. He accepts that Al Itihaad "has been the primary most radical Islamist group in the country for over a decade." It arose in the 1980s, made up of groups of young men "particularly disenchanted with the corrupt repressive government of Mohammed Siad Barre." (Siad Barre was supported by the US from the mid 1970s as a counterweight to the Soviet-backed regime in Ethiopia, and the US only stopped supporting him following the disintegration of the Soviet Union.)

Neither does the picture of Al Itihaad being an active terrorist organisation have any justification. Menkhaus points to the fact that although Al Itihaad controlled a number of regions in the early 1990s and controlled one town, Luuq near the Kenyan border, until it was driven out by Ethiopian troops in 1996, "Al Itihaad failed in its earlier attempts to exert control over territory in Somalia." After its defeat, "Al Itihaad leaders concluded that Somalia was not yet ready for Islamic rule."

Al Itihaad failed, explains Menkhaus, because it tried to work independently of the clan system that dominates Somalian society, and because it received some support from Sudan it was seen by many Somalis as a foreign puppet. It now exists as a very disparate organisation, attempting to promote fundamentalist Islam, trying to infiltrate such government organisations as exist and trying to influence businessmen. Its main goals, unlike Al Qaeda, "are domestic and not international."

In so far as the media claims regarding Al Qaeda, Al Itihaad, and terrorism in Somalia are not fabrications of the US intelligence agencies, Menkhaus explains their likely source: "US policy makers should avoid an over-reliance on information from the Ethiopian government, since it has a vested interest in exaggerating Al Itihaad activities in order to receive assistance in

combating the group." Also within Somalia: "Excessive reliance on local groups willing to fight Al Itihaad must be avoided, because most of these groups are probably more interested in continuously receiving US resources than actually eliminating terrorist threats."

The same motivation to gain US funding certainly applies to the Iraqi opposition groups. Moreover the allegation that Saddam Hussein is funding terrorist groups connected to Al Qaeda in Somalia, neatly dovetails with calls for military intervention in Iraq that could bring the opposition to power as a US proxy government.

The nationalist ambitions of the Ethiopian regime in relation to Somalia are hardly a secret. Using their false claim that Al Itihaad has taken over Puntland as a justification, the Ethiopian army has now moved into the region, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. The November 28 article reports that while not officially sanctioning the invasion, a US official stated that it "didn't raise any alarms" and was "broadly in line with US objectives."

Finally, the claim that Osama bin Laden sent his top lieutenants to support Mohammed Aided in 1993 is pure fabrication.

The US military's interest in Somalia is because of its strategic position. With a large proportion of Europe's oil supply passing along the coast of the Horn of Africa and its closeness to the Middle East, Somalia is of key geopolitical importance. In 1993 the US attempted to gain support for its intervention in the guise of a humanitarian peacekeeping role; now it is using the threat of terrorism. When over 20,000 US troops were sent to Somalia in 1993, after first negotiating a deal with two of the local warlords—Aided and Ali Mahdi—growing popular resistance to the intervention was "explained" by building up Aided as the personification of evil. Aided had to be dealt with at all costs, even if that meant shooting down hundreds of innocent civilians in Mogadishu with helicopter gunfire. The result was not just that Aided opposed the US intervention, but the Somali population as a whole fought back, temporarily uniting even the warring clan factions, and resulting in an ignominious humiliation in which 18 US soldiers were killed.

It is a convenient fiction in the "war against terrorism" to put the forced withdrawal of US troops from Somalia down to Osama bin Laden as well as Mohammed Aided. Ironically, whilst there is no record of Aided receiving backing from the Islamic fundamentalists in Sudan—where bin Laden was residing at the time—there is apparently a connection with Afghanistan. Somalis trained by mujahideen fighters who had returned from Afghanistan, where US intelligence forces had shown then how to use rocket-propelled grenades to hit Soviet aircraft, brought down the US Black Hawk helicopters in Mogadishu.



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