

US proposes "limited operations" in Somalia

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The Bush administration are still considering military action in Somalia, despite admitting that they have found no Al Qaeda training camps in the country. There are also plans for "hot pursuit" of Al Qaeda members fleeing to Somalia, and the US is said to be willing to use help from the Ethiopian military, or from the various militia run by warlords in Somalia, to snatch Al Qaeda members.

According to the *Wall Street Journal* December 12, a US intelligence review has concluded that there is a "small" Al Qaeda presence in Somalia that could be "rooted out with limited operations by US forces or allies".

After the September 11 attacks, a Somali Islamic fundamentalist organisation called Al Itihaad al Islamiya was placed on the US list of terrorist organisations, and has been described repeatedly as being linked to Al Qaeda. The intelligence review found that Al Itihaad "may" be harbouring terrorists wanted by the US, but an official is quoted saying "it's at a very low level."

A *Washington Post* article of December 11 reports an intelligence specialist saying: "Intense aerial reconnaissance has failed to produce hard physical targets such as terrorist training camps," and that Al Itihaad "is not very visible at all", having been "thrashed" by Ethiopian forces four years ago. The *Post* article explains that an interdiction force of 30 to 40 US naval ships, submarines and P-3 aircraft, together with ships from Britain, France, Italy, Canada and Australia have been patrolling the Arabian Sea for the last month looking for Al Qaeda members fleeing to Somalia. On average, 30 to 40 ships a day are challenged and some of them are searched, but no escapees have been found. A report in the British *Times* said that no evidence was found after searching the island of Ras Kamboni, off the south coast of Somalia, that was claimed to be a base for terrorist activities.

The US is also monitoring aircraft flying into Somalia, but again without finding any evidence of terrorist activity. According to the *Wall Street Journal* article, regular flights from Yemen were thought to be related to Al Qaeda activity. "But officials came to believe most of the flights were Yemeni smugglers bring in khat, a leafy plant widely chewed in Somalia for its mild narcotic effect."

Everything points to the US having no evidence of any Al Qaeda operations in Somalia, except allegations being provided by the Ethiopian government and the Somali warlords. But this source of information is highly dubious, as Ken Menkhaus, a former adviser to the United Nations on Somalia and now consultant to the US government, has pointed out. Menkhaus has said that Al Itihaad no longer exists as a military organisation. "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," he said. Of the various warlords and militias within Somalia, Menkhaus warned: "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."

Last year an attempt was made to set up a Somali government based in the capital Mogadishu, after a decade during which no central state has existed in the country. After a conference of clan representatives, intellectuals, ex-civil servants and some of the warlords met at Arta, Djibouti, the Transitional National Government (TNG) was established with UN backing and nominal support, if not aid, from most Western governments. The TNG presently controls only part of Mogadishu, with the rest of the country still dominated by various warlords. In the early 1990s, a few clan-

based militias dominated the country, but in his report to the UN, Menkhaus says that now, “the once relatively cohesive factions have splintered into quarrelling sub-clan militias, so that most armed conflict since 1995 [when UN forces pulled out] has been within, rather than between, major clans. This has meant that the country is less vulnerable to major armed clashes, but more prone to smaller, localised, and less predictable armed hostilities in neighbourhoods and towns.”

Some of the warlords opposed to the TNG are now grouped in a rival organisation, the Somali Reconciliation and Reconstruction Council (SRRC), backed by neighbouring Ethiopia, which has long had regional ambitions in Somalia. According to the British magazine *Africa Confidential*, the SRRC is the source of much of the information alleging Al Qaeda involvement in Somalia, passed by the Ethiopian government to the US administration. “Ethiopia wants to see the TNG emasculated and is upset that the UN Political Office for Somali’s mandate has been extended,” says *Africa Confidential*. The Ethiopian propaganda alleges that not only dozens of Islamic radicals but also senior members of the TNG government, including the President Abdiqasim Salad Hassan, are working with Al Qaeda.

None of the US administration press briefings have cited any other sources of information than those provided by Ethiopia and the SRRC. Nevertheless, US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz repeated this week that Somalia “has a certain Al Qaeda presence already”. On this basis, Al Barakaat, the main financial organisation that Somalis living abroad use to transfer funds back home, was closed down last month by the Bush administration, punishing an impoverished population that relies heavily on income sent from overseas relatives.

It seems that Washington is also ignoring the TNG government. According to the *BBC* December 9, Somali Prime Minister Hassan Abshir Farah strongly rejected the charges of an Al Qaeda presence and sent “the Bush administration a letter of invitation to come here to see what is here. We are ready to fight the terrorists.”

Co-chairman of the SRRC is none other than Hussein Aideed, son of the warlord Mohammed Aideed who the US held personally responsible for the death of US

soldiers in the disastrous military intervention into Somalia in 1993. Typical of Aideed’s rhetoric is the following quote in a Reuters report: “The Al Itihaad and Al Qaeda terrorists who escaped from Afghanistan are already trickling back into Somalia. These groups have unlimited funds which they receive from Islamic non-governmental organisations and Arab states which they are using to woo poverty-stricken Somalis to their side.”

It seems that Aideed and the SRRC may already be viewed as a CIA asset in any US intervention in Somalia. Whilst overt collaboration with the Ethiopian government could jeopardise “wider Arab support for the war on terrorism”, explains the *Wall Street Journal*, and Ethiopia has not been given a green light to launch a major military offensive, the article confirms reports that US government personnel have met leaders of the Rahanwein Resistance Army (RRA), which is allied to Aideed’s SRRC. The talks involved a team of five US representatives, presumed to be CIA men, who were accompanied by Ethiopian military officers. RRA leaders are said to have told the American team of the alleged whereabouts of an Al Itihaad training camp near the Kenyan border.



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