

US assassination in Somalia

Brian Smith

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United States commandos from the Pentagon's Joint Special Operations Command launched a helicopter raid last week in Somalia, close to the border with Kenya, and killed a key Islamist suspect.

Some reports state that four helicopter gunships, others say it was six, took off shortly after noon from a US Navy warship offshore. Less than an hour later the helicopters strafed a small group of four-wheel drives carrying Islamist militants linked to al Shabaab, which Washington accuses of being Al Qaeda's proxy in Somalia.

The attack took place as the convoy sped towards the coastal town of Barawe, about 150 miles south of the capital, Mogadishu, deep in territory controlled by al Shabaab.

The primary target was Kenyan-born Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, who was on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "most wanted" list and who has been hunted by Washington since 2002.

"Our security intelligence reports confirm that Nabhan was killed," stated Somali official Abdi Fitah Shawey.

Several trucks, including a Land Cruiser carrying Nabhan and other senior militants, were hit by commandos firing machineguns and automatic weapons. Two of the helicopters landed and there was a brief fire fight in which nine militants were killed, according to al Shabaab. Troops jumped from the helicopters, inspected the wreckage and seized the body of Nabhan and at least one other militant, along with two other injured militants, before flying off.

Senior US officials, on condition of anonymity, confirmed that President Obama had signed off on the operation.

Security sources in Kenya believe that US commanders would have received specific and urgent intelligence that Nabhan was on the move, and a US adviser concurred: "This approach was, 'Let's do it very quickly, very swiftly and confirm he's gone,'" he said.

The overwhelming firepower used is demonstrated by the comments of US sources. "These young fighters do not have the same skills as their colleagues in Afghanistan

or elsewhere when it comes to foreign air strikes," a government source told Reuters. "They are in confusion now."

Some locals reported that troops involved in the operation in Barawe had French flags on their uniforms, which France denied. France, like the US, has a large military base in neighbouring Djibouti.

Nabhan was linked by Washington to the 2002 truck bombing of an Israeli-run hotel in Kenya in which 15 people died, and was also alleged to have been involved in an attempt to bring down an airplane, carrying mostly Israeli tourists, with a rocket-propelled grenade as it was taking off from Kenya's Mombasa airport later the same day.

The Kenyan authorities, who work closely with Washington, also regard Nabhan as a suspect in the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 that killed 229 people. The US accused Nabhan of running Al Qaeda training camps in Somalia for local and foreign fighters.

Al Shabaab has vowed to retaliate.

Rashid Abdi, a Somalia analyst at the International Crisis Group, commented, "A backlash in Somalia is bound to happen, but what is more worrying is what kind of retaliation we might see against Western targets in the Horn of Africa region."

The Obama administration claims there is a growing Al Qaeda influence in the Horn of Africa, using this supposed link to justify providing greater military and economic support for the puppet Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) against insurgents such as al Shabaab, who along with allied Islamist militias now control the bulk of the country.

During her Africa tour last month, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met Somali president Sheikh Sharif Ahmed and promised him support to combat al Shabaab, in addition to the 40 tons of arms and ammunition sent to Sharif's government in June.

The US military claims that Somalia is set to become the new base for Al Qaeda leaders to spread mayhem in

Africa, to justify the build-up of US warships and Special Forces in a geo-politically strategic and oil-rich area of the globe. But there is little evidence of Al Qaeda involvement in Somalia, where the insurgency is largely home grown and is the result of decades of US intervention.

The primary destabilising force in the Horn of Africa in general and Somalia in particular is the US. The explosive spread of militarism is rooted in the deepening crisis of US capitalism. As the economic foundations of the United States claim to global hegemony weaken, Washington is driven to ever greater reliance on its residual military superiority. Somalia provides a case study in the immense destruction and human suffering produced by this policy.

US ships permanently patrol the Gulf of Aden off the Horn of Africa, one of the world's major sea lanes allowing access to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. The US seeks to dominate the resources, trade and seaways of the region at the expense of all its imperialist rivals. China's presence, whose interests in the region increased in recent years, has complicated the picture. The US, which has a long-established base in the former French colony of Djibouti, does not intend to allow China to challenge its control of this strategic chokepoint in world trade.

US actions in Somalia over several decades have left the country a chaotic, lawless hellhole, where about 1 million people are internally displaced and around 3 million rely on food aid. The lack of a functioning government acceptable to the population has forced many to turn to the Islamists for some semblance of stability and order, however brutal. The US administration has scant regard for the suffering it has unleashed and regards Somalia as merely another theatre in its phoney "war on terror."

Nabhan's execution by US forces will further weaken the credibility of the TFG and exacerbate factional infighting. Sharif, a "moderate" Islamist, was elected in January in an attempt to forge a coalition between secular and Islamist political factions, but is regarded as a traitor by his former comrades in the Union of Islamic Courts, and with suspicion by his former foes.

The US has carried out a series of missile raids aimed at killing senior Islamists in recent years. In May 2008, US warplanes killed the leader of al-Shabaab Aden Hashi Ayro, in an attack in Dusamareb in central Somalia.

They also attempted but failed to kill Nabhan and another Islamist, Hassan Turki, in March last year when missiles were fired at Doble in southern Somalia in a pre-dawn attack, killing at least three women and three

children and wounding scores more. Witnesses said that at least three missiles struck the town, north of the Kenyan border.

In June 2007 the US navy launched missile strikes on the port of Baar Gaal and surrounding areas in Puntland in the north of Somalia in pursuit of three suspects involved in the 1998 Kenyan and Tanzanian embassy bombings, destroying farms and flattening hilltops. They made the unlikely claim that only militant Islamists were killed, including eight foreign militants who were said to be from the US, Britain, Eritrea, Sweden and Yemen.

In January 2007 the US launched two air strikes, one on Hayi, 30 miles from Afmadow near the Kenyan border which killed 31 civilians, including two newlyweds, and the other on a remote island 155 miles away, which involved a US Air Force AC-130 gunship launched from the US base in Djibouti. Both were attempts to kill Islamists allegedly linked to the embassy bombings.

The highly targeted nature of this latest attack demonstrates a change in US military intervention in Somalia, believes Peter Pham, senior fellow and director of the Africa Project at the National Committee on American Foreign Policy in New York. "This marks an evolution in US operational and intelligence capabilities," he said.

Somalia can be seen as a model for US strategy in the region and its development since the US military was driven out of Somalia in 1993 following the "Black Hawk down" incident that claimed the lives of 19 US troops. Since then, the US military has avoided exposing large numbers of their own troops to danger, in a pattern set by the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia with local forces providing the ground troops whilst US Special Forces directed them.

The various missile attacks have followed a similar pattern, with local intelligence identifying targets and calling in air or naval support to provide heavy fire power when necessary. The death of Nabhan, along with the arming of a stooge government, indicates that Obama intends to continue in the same way.



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