

US backs plan to send more troops to Somalia

Ann Talbot
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Meeting at the African Union Summit in Kampala, African leaders have agreed to send more troops to Somalia to support the Transitional Federal Government against the Islamist militia al-Shabaab.

US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson welcomed the decision. “We believe that it is necessary to have more troops on the ground,” he said, “and we in Washington have committed ourselves to support additional troops on the ground in the same fashion that we have supported the existing Burundi and Ugandan troops.”

Carson said that Washington would provide the African Union Mission to Somalia with more technical and financial support. He claimed that three more African countries had agreed to join the mission, but declined to name them.

Extra troops are said to be coming from Guinea and Djibouti. The US is eager to deploy non-Christian troops to placate Somali Islamists.

The decision to send more troops follows a double suicide bombing in Kampala, the Ugandan capital on July 11. Two bombs at the Kyadondo rugby club and another at an Ethiopian restaurant in Kabalagala in the suburbs of Kampala targeted crowds watching the South African World Cup final. They have so far claimed 85 lives.

Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the blasts, which it said were in response to the presence of Uganda troops in Somalia. AMISOM, the African Union Mission in Somalia, currently consists of 6,000 troops from Uganda and Burundi. Both have agreed to send more troops, bringing the total to 9,500.

Carson appealed for international support for AMISON. It should not be seen as “an American project,” he said, and warned that the bomb attacks in Kampala had demonstrated that al-Shabaab was capable of launching terror attacks outside Somalia.

The bombing and the tragic loss of life has provided a reason to reinforce AMISOM and drum up international support for an intervention that has proved to be disastrous for the US and increasingly bloody for Somali civilians. A major offensive launched by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and AMISOM earlier this year involved heavy shelling of civilians in the capital Mogadishu. It was financed by the US and its European allies who have provided weapons and training.

“This is not an American offensive,” Carson said at the time. “The US military is not on the ground in Somalia. Full stop.”

He added, “There are limits to outside engagement, and there has to be an enormous amount of local buy-in for this work.”

But the whole offensive was backed up by US surveillance drones. It followed an earlier operation in which US Special Forces killed al-Shabaab leader Saleh Ali Nabhan, who claimed to be the head of al-Qaeda in Somalia. His car was blown up by helicopters launched from a US naval vessel off the Somali coast. They touched down briefly to retrieve the body. This technique of targeted killings has become a hallmark of US operations in the area under the Obama administration.

Neither the high-tech assassinations nor the ground offensive has succeeded in its objective of carving out an enclave within Mogadishu for the TFG. Al-Shabaab forces now control most of the country and are within 300 metres of the presidential palace. Hundreds of TFG troops, including members of the presidential guard, are said to have defected to al-Shabaab, taking their weapons with them.

AMISOM forces can do little more than guard the palace and the port through which American weapons and ammunitions flow. They have not been paid for the last nine months and some are reported to have died of malnutrition.

Anticipating the collapse of the TFG, Sheik Mohamed Said Atom, who leads an insurgent group in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, has recently allied himself with al-Shabaab.

Following the AU summit it seems that the US is preparing for another surge. The repeated failure of the US to impose a client regime in Somalia is leading to criticism and ever more public discussion about US strategy. Inevitably comparisons are being drawn with Afghanistan and questions raised about Yemen.

“The West is fighting a war on terrorism in Afghanistan. But the terrorists are somewhere else,” Gideon Rachman remarked in the *Financial Times* recently. He cited two possible alternative options.

“The first is to apply the Afghan model to Somalia—and to intervene massively on the ground to combat terrorism and to help build a functioning state,” he said. “The second option is to apply the Somali model to Afghanistan. That would mean accepting that outside military intervention is often counterproductive, that its human costs are too high, that state-building is unlikely to work and that the West should concentrate on bottling terrorism up, rather than trying to defeat it on the battlefield.”

Rachman's article reflected a recent report from the Council of Foreign Relations (CFR), the US think tank that publishes *Foreign Affairs*, and the discussion that took place at Chatham House in London at a debate hosted by the *Economist*. Bronwyn Bruton, author of the CFR's special report *Somalia: a New Approach*, advocates what she calls "constructive disengagement" from Somalia.

"Foreigners should not intervene in Somalia," Bruton told the Chatham House audience, "because the international efforts will galvanise the radicals and prolong Somalia's suffering."

"As in Afghanistan, there is no inexpensive way to improve the situation: a viable counterinsurgency campaign will require decades of effort, billions of dollars and hundreds or thousands of lost lives." She added, "Less comprehensive efforts to back the TFG—with arms shipments and diplomatic gestures—have done incalculable harm, fuelling a vicious stalemate between the weak government and its extremist rivals, displacing hundreds of thousands of people from their homes and pushing Somalia to the brink of a conflict-induced famine."

She argued that the US should resume shipments of humanitarian aid that have been halted on the grounds that they may fall into the hands of al-Shabaab. But she made it clear that she supported the Obama administration's use of targeted assassinations:

"The September 2009 strike against an Al-Qaeda operative, Saleh Ali Nabhan, is a perfect model. Conducted in a remote rural location without civilian casualties, it stirred not a hint of public protest. It is a firm clue that the locals do not object to sensible international assistance in ridding Somalia of foreign parasites attempting to exploit the country's conflict—as long as the innocent aren't caught up in the crossfire."

This "sensible international assistance" is the same tactic that is being deployed in the tribal territories of Pakistan and has led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians. It is in reality a terror tactic designed to intimidate the civilian population with a demonstration of US military might.

There is nothing more humane or civilised about the CFR's new approach. *New York Times* correspondent Jeffrey Gettleman made it clear that Bruton's option involved a protracted civil war as one faction succeeded another.

"Many analysts argue that it would be better, in the long run, to pull out all the peacekeepers, let the transitional government fall, let the Shabaab take over the country, and then allow clan militias and businessmen to rise up and overthrow them," he wrote. "The eventual result, analysts argue, would be a government that would be more organic and therefore more durable than a government that relies on outside forces to survive."

The civilian population would be left to bear the consequences of the ensuing struggle for power. The fact that the American media can discuss the future of nearly 9,890,000 people in these callous terms points to their complete moral bankruptcy. The discussion reflects the attitudes that have come

to prevail in the American elite in the wake of a global war of aggression unparalleled since World War II.

"I don't think there's a strategy that will cause less harm," Bruton told the *Times*.

As the situation in Somalia deteriorates, disagreements are emerging within the political elite about the best approach. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently received a letter from 13 House Democrats who warned of the danger to the US of terrorism emanating from Somalia.

The letter stated, "Al-Shabaab-controlled territory in Somalia is becoming a safe haven for terrorists from around the world. The United States must not sit back.... Extremists in Somalia have already made clear their intentions to harm us, and if they have not done so already, they will soon seek capabilities to carry out attacks in the United States."

The letter demanded "extensive financial, material and logistical support" for African forces to suppress al-Shabaab.

Even more hysterical was Marc A. Thiessen, a visiting fellow of the American Enterprise Institute. In an op-ed piece for the *Washington Post* he warned that "a new transnational terrorist network is taking shape in East Africa—one that may have its sights set on the United States."

Pointing to the prosecution of a North Virginian man, Zachary Adam Chesser, for attempting to travel to Somalia to fight for al-Shabaab, Thiessen claimed that some 20 young Somali Americans had left Minnesota to join al-Shabaab.

"The fact that al-Qaeda's new East African affiliate is seeking out Americans is an ominous sign. After all, you don't need fighters with US passports if your only intent is to conduct operations in Africa."

He blamed the Obama administration for missing an opportunity to gather intelligence about possible future attacks on US soil when they killed Saleh Ali Nabhan instead of capturing and interrogating him. Senior military figures wanted Nabhan taken alive, according to Thiessen, but Obama opted for assassination.

What for Bruton is the perfect model of an anti-terrorist operation is for Thiessen a culpable failure. The tone of the disagreement is sharp. But the substance of the differences between these two factions of the US elite is whether it is preferable to summarily execute opponents or to convey them to a secret prison and torture them for protracted periods. Both approaches express the unanimity of the top echelons of US society in their willingness to resort to illegal methods and dispense with the conventions of international law.



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