The London Conference on Somalia: Imperialists plan military buildup in Horn of Africa

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Although promoted in the name of "political reform," "economic development," and "drought relief," the "London Conference on Somalia," hosted by the British government in London from May 12 to 13, served as a planning forum for imperialist military projects in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. The main outcome of the conference was a Security Pact that commits the United Kingdom and unnamed "international partners" to support the creation of a new Somali National Army (SNA). The SNA force is planned to include 18,000 regular soldiers, 4,000 special forces, and a Somalia Air Force and Somalia Maritime Force, and will be tasked with defending the Federal Government of Somalia (FSG).

In opening remarks to the conference, British Prime Minister Theresa May outlined a "revised federal constitution" and a "political agreement on resource and power sharing," based on agreements signed by Somalia's regional elites in April. The revised Somali constitution, May said, will enable the FSG regime in Mogadishu to gain support for a centralized army, by granting greater political autonomy to Somalia's semi-autonomous regional governments in Somaliland and Puntland.

"Somalia's forces need to be built up through a federated model that also brings in regional forces," May said.

In exchange for their collaboration with the security framework, the African national elites assembled in London can expect financial and military backing from the United Kingdom and the "international community," May made clear.

"In return, the international community will back these reforms with better targeted support for economic recovery. This will include the targeting of donor support on key investment priorities…and support for mobilising development finance and working towards securing debt relief," May said.

The British PM assured attendees that the SNA will enjoy support from the American and British militaries and their regional allies. She touted the array of foreign military projects under way inside Somalia, including "the UK's commitment to train Somali forces in Baidoa, the UAE's development of a state of the art training facility, America's training and equipping of Danab Special Forces and Turkey's work to train Somali officers and NCOs." [1]

European Union (EU) High Representative Frederica Mogherini offered "reengagement with international financial institutions" as an incentive for Mogadishu's fulfillment of its pledges to build up Somalia's security apparatus and enact "structural reforms" to its economy. Mogherini vowed that EU financial support to Somalia will increase from €800 million to €3.5 billion by 2020.

"The European Union is ready and willing to accompany this process. But I want to be very clear; before we can make decisions about our financial support, we need to see effective coordination and burden sharing in managing this transition towards a Somali-owned security system, with full participation by regional countries. We are ready and willing to be fully engaged in this process," Mogherini said.

In comments outside the London Conference, United States Secretary of Defense James Mattis told reporters he was "heartened" by talks with Somalia's president, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed. The former Marine Corps general, who personally oversaw the US military's genocidal assault against Fallujah, Iraq, praised President Mohamed as "a very good leader in terms of understanding the need for military security."

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When asked whether the Pentagon is preparing further deployments of US ground troops, beyond the dozens of US paratroopers sent to Somalia in mid-April, Mattis replied: “That’s a decision [more US troops to Somalia] we’ll take if it’s broached to us, and we’ll decide yes or no.”

“The Somali people have to be defended,” said Mattis.

Washington is absolutely determined to maintain its grip over Somalia, even if this means a significantly larger air and ground war, comparable to those in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. American imperialism cannot accept the loss of Somalia, which overlooks the Gulf of Aden and the Mandeb Strait, the most important commercial waterway and strategic chokepoint worldwide. The Pentagon’s largest military base in Africa, Camp Lemmonier in neighboring Djibouti, is a central logistical and command hub for US military operations throughout Africa, the Middle East and Eurasia.

“The US government is clearly aiming at a military solution,” retired UN Africa official Peter Schumann told *Deutsche Welle*, commenting on the attitude of the Trump administration toward the London Conference.

Humanitarian experts are warning that any further military escalation in Somalia will severely disrupt relief efforts, amid record-breaking levels of drought, famine, and disease. The number of malnourished children living in Somalia may grow to nearly 1.5 million in the coming year, surging by more than 50 percent from last year’s total, according to UNICEF. Across Somalia as a whole, “6.2 million are severely food insecure, 439,000 are at risk of famine, and 275,000 malnourished children are at risk of starvation,” the UN secretary general reported Thursday. The worst of the famine is concentrated in “Bay, Bakool, Banadir, Gedo, Lower Shabelle, Nugaal, Middle Shabelle and Banadir regions,” according to ReliefWeb.

“The international humanitarian system is at its breaking point,” Dominic MacSorley of the humanitarian NGO Concern Worldwide said.

The Western and African troops tasked with defending the FSG will confront a Somali population that is increasingly restive, desperate, and sympathetic to the insurgents. The militaries of no fewer than five other African states, with national interests opposed to those of the FGS, are active on Somali territory. In his remarks from London, Somali President Mohamed acknowledged the dire situation confronting his regime by pleading for the major powers to supply his government with heavy weaponry.

“For far too long, our security forces and terrorist groups have been fighting using the same type of light weapons, mostly AK47s,” he said. “Somalia must have qualitatively better equipment and weapons than the terrorists.”

Somalia’s president warned: “If we don’t have more sophisticated and better weaponry, this war will definitely continue for another 10 years.”

US officials brushed aside President Mohamed’s request, pointing to the longstanding arms embargo against Somalia. The Trump administration has nonetheless proven ready to arm the regional powers with high-tech armaments. Last week, the White House approved the sale of $250 million worth of high-tech weapons to the Kenyan government of President Uhuru Kenyatta. The sale includes “12 MD530F Cayuse Warrior light attack helicopters, 24 heavy machine gun pods, 24 HMP400 machine gun pod systems, 24 M260 rocket pods, 4,032 M151 high-explosive rockets, 1,536 M274 smoke rockets, 400,000 rounds of .50 calibre ammunition and communications/navigation equipment.”

Responding to speculation about the withdrawal of AMISOM, President Kenyatta pledged last week that the Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) will remain in Somalia until al Shabaab is “completely defeated.”

Notes:

[1] As in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria and elsewhere, Washington strives to organize new proxy armies in Somalia. The Danab unit referred to by May is a special commando force, whose members are trained by American soldiers and fight in close coordination with US Special Forces. Soldiers for Danab are contracted by security firms based out of the United States, and function as mercenaries under the direct control of US military-intelligence handlers.

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