



# The Guns of October: How the Invasion of Somalia Changed Kenya

By Patrick Gathara



When Kenyan troops crossed the proverbial Rubicon and entered Somalia nearly six years ago, it caught almost everyone by surprise. It was Kenya's first sustained and significant foray into its troubled neighbors territory and ran counter to the country's historic pacifism -at least in international if not necessarily in domestic, affairs- as well as against the grain of the advice she had received from her much more experienced friends and patrons in the international community.

The immediate trigger of Kenya's offensive was a spate of kidnappings of aid workers and tourists near the Somalia border, which had devastated the country's lucrative tourism industry and which the government blamed on the al Shabaab terror group. Since 2007, the al Shabaab, had been fighting to oust the then transitional government in Mogadishu which was protected by AU forces under the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM). Allied to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda, the al Shabaab had carried out atrocities both inside and outside Somalia, including the July 2010 bombings in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, which targeted football fans watching the soccer World Cup final and killed 76 people.

The objectives given by the Kenyan government for the invasion were [both confused and confusing](#). Spokesman Alfred Mutua initially claimed the KDF was pursuing the alleged kidnappers across the border but later admitted that the kidnappings had been an excuse to launch a plan that had "been

in the pipeline for a while.” Despite the fact that the al Shabaab had strongly denied having anything to do with the kidnappings and the government produced no evidence to back up its allegations, it still dispatched a letter to the UN Security Council citing the “latest direct attacks on Kenyan territory and the accompanying loss of life and kidnappings of Kenyans and foreign nationals by the Al-Shabaab terrorists” as reason for “remedial and pre-emptive action” undertaken “to protect and preserve the integrity of Kenya and the efficacy of the national economy and to secure peace and security.”

The stated objectives for the incursion quickly escalated. They ran the gamut from rescuing the kidnapped foreigners to pushing al Shabaab away from the border and establishing a buffer zone, to the capture of the port city of Kismayo, the dismantling of al Shabaab and the stabilization of Somalia. “We are going to be there until the (Somali government) has effectively reduced the capacity of al-Shabaab to fire a single round ... We want to ensure there is no al Shabaab,” declared military spokesman, Major Emmanuel Chirchir.

The first few weeks were greeted with euphoric displays of patriotism from a polarized populace desperate for something to rally around. Less than four years prior, the country had almost torn itself apart following the shambolic and disputed elections of 2007. For a country used to seeing itself, despite the testimony of history, as “an island of peace in a sea of chaos”, the episode was profoundly traumatizing and left in its wake deep and disturbing questions about what it meant to be Kenyan. The adoption of a new constitution in 2010, a seminal moment in any nation’s history, had done little to quieten the nagging doubts. A Government of National Unity formed in the aftermath of the violence was proving to be a testy affair. The power struggles and political realignments within it, as well as the continuing and blatant theft of public resources it presided over, undermined rather than reinforced the already shaky idea of Kenya.

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But if there’s one thing that can be relied on to rally a people, it is war. And war was what the media branded the invasion. “Kenyan troops off to war” blared the Daily Nation headline. “We are in a war against terrorists in and outside our country,” President Uhuru Kenyatta would declare in December 2014. However, there has never been an official declaration of war, either against Somalia or against Al Shabaab, which according to the constitution requires the authorization of Parliament.

Regardless, following the invasion Kenyans were treated to breathless coverage of the exploits and capacities of their valiant and heroic troops. Tales came about captured towns that few had ever heard of and one front page article even proclaimed the “imminent fall of Kismayo”. Uncomfortable questions about the aims and wisdom of the invasion were quickly swept aside. Still, as John Adams, the second President of the United States said, “facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

The first hints of the morass Kenya had got herself mired in came quite early on. Within weeks of setting foot in Somalia, the troops were literally stuck in mud as the invasion had been conducted at the height of Somalia’s *dehr* short rain season. 60 days into what had been branded Operation Linda Nchi, Franklin would [report](#) that “KDF ground units are bogged down in the mud of South Central Somalia or marooned in the vicinity of Ras Kamboni on the Indian Ocean. Bad weather seems to

have severely limited sorties by fixed wing ground attack aircraft as well as KDF attack helicopters". It would take the KDF nearly 7 months to capture Afmadow, al Shabaab's logistical base, and a year to get to Kismayo, Somalia's second largest port, which was the real prize. By this time, Operation Linda Nchi had been wound down without achieving any of its objectives and 4600 Kenyan troops transferred to AMISOM.

Back in Kenya, the novelty of war had worn thin and the country was settling down to yet another divisive and scary election campaign. It was also coming to terms with the fact that the battle with the al Shabaab would not just be fought in Somalia. Almost immediately after the invasion, al Shabaab leaders had begun promising "huge blasts" in Nairobi. An initial campaign attacks using hand grenades and improvised explosives badly damaged the already fragile perception of security. But what completely shattered it was the attack on the Westgate Mall in September 2013 where 4 terrorists murdered at least 68 people and ruthlessly exposed the incompetence and corruption at the heart of the national security establishment.

In fact, it is arguable that the biggest casualties of the invasion of Somalia have been the national security agencies and especially the KDF. Prior to the invasion, the KDF was seen as a professional, disciplined, if spoilt and coddled, military force. It was widely thought to be immune to the foibles and prejudices and moral and material decay afflicting the rest of the public service. Westgate put paid to all that. Few will ever forget the grainy [CCTV footage](#) of soldiers, who were meant to be battling the terrorists, instead strolling out of the Nakumatt supermarket carrying plastic shopping bags. The four-day fiasco, the friendly fire incident in which the KDF shot and killed a commander of the General Service Unit's Recce Squad, the looting of the mall, the confused public updates and the inability to take on 4 armed men at the heat of the city destroyed public confidence in the KDF and in the intelligence agencies.

The carefully cultivated reputation of the National Intelligence Service, honed during its time as the Directorate of Security Intelligence, better known as the "Special Branch", and favorite tool of surveillance and repression by the brutal regime of Daniel Arap Moi, was also in tatters. It would be completely obliterated by a series of large attacks which came within the two years following Westgate. These include the massacres in Mpeketoni and at the Garissa University College, and the attacks on buses and workers in Mandera, all of which claimed tens and sometimes hundreds of lives, and which were all, somewhat unfairly, blamed on failures of intelligence.

For the KDF, the bad news would keep on coming. It was again at the centre of the failures in both Mpeketoni and Garissa University, and was accused in a November 2015 report of profiteering from the Somalia deployment. A [report](#) titled "Black and White" by Journalists for Justice, accused the KDF of colluding with al Shabaab, the very enemy they are supposed to be fighting, to illegally export charcoal out of Somalia ports and to smuggle sugar into Kenya. Similar allegations had been made by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea and the KDF's vehement denials and empty promises to investigate did little to salvage its reputation.

On January 15, 2016 the AMISOM base at the nondescript Somali town of El Adde, which was manned by troops from the Kenyan contingent, was overrun by the al Shabaab. Up to 200 soldiers were killed and a dozen kidnapped. A UN [report](#) by the accused KDF of failure to implement basic defensive measures and concluded that the al Shabaab faced "relatively little resistance from the Kenyan troops".

Back home, the government and the KDF retreated into silence, obviously hoping the questions and calls for accountability would go away. They would be temporarily jolted out of their reverie a year later when another KDF-manned camp was overrun by al Shabaab, this time at Kulbiyow. Different accounts of what happened have been offered with The Standard [claiming](#) up to 68 soldiers were

killed and the KDF putting the number at 9 with 15 injured.

None of this has done the KDF's reputation much good. Today, its star is considerably diminished. It has turned out to be just as vacuous, corrupt, incompetent and unaccountable as nearly all the other public institutions in the political firmament.

Regardless of this, the government has not shied away from increasing the deployment of the KDF internally. In fact, especially since October 2011, the military has taken on a much more public profile. For a country which has never experienced the misfortune of military rule, Kenya has always had an uneasy relationship with its soldiers. Following two failed coup plots in the 70s and the 80s, the political elite has preferred to keep the troops happy, well fed and watered in their barracks. But, as Daniel Branch [noted](#) in Foreign Policy, by 2011, the KDF had "been trained and equipped to do much more than parade on national holidays." Increased counter-terrorism funding from Washington had underwritten a stronger Kenyan military which in turn had "grown more confident and combative".

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In the aftermath of the invasion of Somalia, it has now become almost routine for the government to deploy this capability to deal with local trouble spots within the country without seeking authorization from the National Assembly as required by the constitution. Neither does it appear that the Inspector General of Police is made "responsible for the administration, command, control and overall superintendence of the operation" as required by the KDF Act.

In December 2013 President Kenyatta raised hackles when he announced the formation of the Nairobi Metropolitan Command of the KDF [citing](#) the need to combat "the current threats in the country emerging from terrorism, drug trafficking, proliferation of small arms, and crime, among others, that tend to flourish in highly urbanised areas like Nairobi." And seven months later, [a bill was proposed](#) (and later dropped) which sought to strip Parliament of its power to approve the deployment of the KDF within Kenya. "We need to ensure that we remove the roadblocks on the way that may derail the process of deployment of the military locally so that we can respond faster and swiftly," declared National Assembly Majority Leader, Aden Duale.

Further, in addition to the larger role played by retired officers in the civilian security and intelligence agencies, President Kenyatta earlier this year [appointed](#) the serving Chief of Defense Forces, Gen Samson Mwathethe to chair the Blue Economy implementation Committee which oversees the implementation of government programs.

A scared people are much more willing to bargain away their freedoms for a sense of safety, however ephemeral. And by the end of 2015, Kenyans were a pretty scared lot. The Somalia invasion had backfired spectacularly and not only failed to deliver the promised safety, but made matters much worse. According to a report by the Daily Nation's [Newsplex](#), which cited data from the Global Terrorism Database, the most comprehensive unclassified database on terrorist events conducted by non-state actors and the Nation Media Group's own archives, in the 45 months after Operation Linda Nchi began, there were nine times as many attacks as in the 45 months before the mission. The attacks were also more ferocious, with deaths and injuries multiplying eight-fold in the same period.

The government has instrumentalized the fear this has generated to scapegoat particular communities in order to distract attention from its own actions and to try to roll back the freedoms guaranteed in the 2010 constitution.

[According to](#) Andrew Franklin, a security consultant and former US marine, “Declarations of war justify extraordinary – and temporary – restrictions on all manner of normal domestic activities and curbs on many constitutionally protected freedoms. This is why going to war is considered a big deal and not just a matter of semantics.”

Yet the government has invoked the idea of a country at war to justify the concentration of power in the Executive, especially in the Presidency, the removal of existing constitutional restraints on the exercise of that power and the clampdown on media freedoms and civil liberties. In December 2014, the government forced through Parliament legislation expanding the powers of the President and imposing limitations of civil liberties, including the right to protest and fair trial, as well as curtailing media freedom to publish terrorism-related stories. Just two days before, State House spokesman, Manoah Esipisu, penned a telling [op-ed in the Daily Nation](#) in which he justified these measures on the basis that it was a “time of war”.

The primary targets of the government’s fear-mongering and scapegoating have been the Muslim community and especially, though not exclusively, ethnic Somalis. Be they Kenyan citizens or refugees from Somalia, they have been collectively blamed for the atrocities committed by al Shabaab and this has led to repressive “anti-terror operations” and deportations. In April 2014, the government deployed, [according to says Human Rights Watch](#), about 5000 police officers and KDF troops in Nairobi’s Eastleigh neighborhood following a series of grenade and gun and in Mombasa. Operation Usalama Watch lasted several weeks during which “the forces raided homes, buildings, and shops, extorted massive sums, and harassed and detained an estimated 4,000 people – including journalists, registered refugees, Kenyan citizens, and international aid workers – without charge, and in appalling conditions for periods well beyond the 24-hour legal limit.” Further, in violation of its international obligations, the government is trying to close the Dadaab refugee camp, the world’s largest, and to force nearly half a million refugees back across the border.

In addition to this, extrajudicial assassination and disappearances have also become a preferred way to deal with those suspected of links to al Shabaab. Several radical Muslim clerics at the coast have been murdered and the Anti-Terror Police Unit has been accused of disappearing Somali and Muslim youth across the country and, more specifically, in the arid counties of the former North Eastern Province. This is not new. As the report of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission demonstrates, Somali and Muslim communities have historically suffered the bulk of atrocities committed by both the colonial and post-colonial governments. However, for much of that history, such oppression was carried out in the remote north and hidden from most of the public. During Usalama Watch, however, the state was blatantly carrying out large scale, systematic campaign of extortion and abuse right in the heart of the capital city and targeting a specific minority in broad daylight and with the tacit approval of a large segment of terrorized society.

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Similarly, surveillance too has come out of the shadows. During the Moi dictatorship, the perception of widespread surveillance through networks of informers was key to keeping the population

compliant and afraid. Citizens were afraid to criticize the state since one did not know who might be listening. However, today they welcome even more comprehensive and ubiquitous surveillance, via CCTV cameras and listening in on phone and online conversations, as reassurance that the state is looking out for -rather than watching- them.

In the weeks following the Westgate attack, the government introduced a programme labelled Nyumba Kumi which encouraged citizens to form neighbourhood teams that would spy on members and report “suspicious activities” to the government. It was borrowed from Tanzania where it was used by Julius Nyerere’s government as a means of political control, to strengthen one-party rule. The late Michael Okema in his 1996 book on the Political Culture of Tanzania wrote that the system was “designed to make the citizen more security conscious” and expected him or her “to be all ears on behalf of the state”. Nyumba Kumi has much more ancient roots in 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE China where, as [described by Rev. John MacGowan](#) of the London Missionary Society in 1897, the Ten House System “was a small division of a ward in a city, and consisted of ten dwelling houses. Each of these was responsible to the government for the conduct of the rest.”

The invasion of Somalia and the brutal reaction it inspired have generated a climate of fear and fostered an unthinking and unquestioning patriotism which has paved way for the enforcement of an orthodoxy of “official truth”. Querying government misdeeds especially in the security sector and in the prosecution of its “war on terror” immediately attracts accusations of harboring terrorist sympathies. National security has become the carpet under which governmental ills are hidden. When, in November 2015, journalists [reported](#) on security procurement queries raised by the Auditor-General, three were immediately summoned to the Directorate of Criminal investigations and one was subsequently arrested, apparently on the orders of Internal Security Minister Joseph Ole Nkaissery. He demanded that they reveal their confidential sources claiming that their reports contained information “calculated to create a perception that there were malpractices relating to procuring security items within the Interior ministry” that could “expose our security forces to significant risk”. Ironically, they were accused of endangering public safety for reporting that the Auditor-General had specifically stated that the corrupt “purchase of second-hand arms and ammunition... had “seriously compromis[ed] the operations of the security agencies”.

Although the severity and regularity of terror attacks within the country have significantly reduced since their peak in 2015, Kenya remains a country on edge. Mass surveillance, ubiquitous security checks, xenophobia and state-sanctioned murder and disappearance of citizens have become normalized. Parliament, the media and civil society have shown little inclination to either demand accountability from the security sector or to encourage an honest public debate over the wisdom, strategy and objectives of continuing military operations in Somalia. Neither has there been anything resembling a deep introspection over the expanded domestic role of the KDF.

The October 2011 invasion may yet help provide Somalia with an opportunity to recover from its decades of turmoil but the experience has already severely degraded Kenya’s institutions and dented her ambitions of entrenching democratic and accountable governance at home. Its effects will be felt for generations to come.

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