



Proxy Wars: The Intrigues Leading to Kenya's Invasion of Somalia

By Rasna Warah



"To my daughter I will say, 'when the men come, set yourself on fire'." - Warsan Shire, Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth

In July 2011, while the world's attention was focused on the famine in Somalia, a plot was being hatched in Nairobi to cross the Kenya-Somalia border and wage a war against the terrorist group Al Shabaab.

Kenya had been spoiling for a fight with Somalia for some time. Cables released by WikiLeaks indicate that the Kenyan government had intentions to militarily intervene in Somalia as early as 2009, and had been trying to convince the United States government about the wisdom of its plan. At that time, the Mwai Kibaki coalition administration had big plans for Kenya's northeastern and coastal regions, including a large deep-sea port in Lamu and a new transport corridor known as the Lamu Port and South Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSSET) that would link the port to Ethiopia and to the oil wells of the newly independent state of Southern Sudan. Creating a safe buffer zone within Somalia to protect Kenya's ambitious project was part of the plan. Dubbed the "Jubbaland Initiative", the ultimate goal was to install a Kenya-friendly regional administration in Kismaayo, the capital of Somalia's Juba region that borders Kenya. According to a newspaper report published in the *Daily Nation*, in December 2009, Kenya's then Foreign Minister, Moses Wetang'ula, told a sceptical senior

US official that if the Kenyan military invaded Somalia, its success was guaranteed – it would be like “a hot knife through butter”.

However, Kenya’s opportunity for military intervention in Somalia only came in the last quarter of 2011 when David Tebbut, a British tourist, was killed and his wife Judith kidnapped while on holiday at the Kenyan coast. What at first appeared to be the work of pirates or criminal gangs was quickly attributed by the Kenyan government to Al Shabaab, which controlled large swathes of south and central Somalia. (The extremist group denied being involved and, according to the BBC, the British government concluded that “those holding her were Somali pirates, purely after money, and not the extremist insurgency group, Al Shabaab”).

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The official reason for Kenya’s mission was to seize control of the port of Kismaayo in order to cut off Al Shabaab’s economic lifeline. The Kenyan forces were assisted in their mission by the Ras Kamboni militia led by Sheikh Ahmed Mohammed Islam, popularly known as Madobe. Interestingly, Madobe had at various stages of his career as an insurgent been a member of the extremist organisation Al Itihad, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) that took control of Mogadishu in 2006, and also of Al Shabaab. Prior to joining the Kenyan forces, he had fallen out with the Ras Kamboni Brigades founded by his brother-in-law Hassan Turki, a career jihadist who had joined forces with Al Shabaab to lay claim over Kismaayo. American journalist Jeremy Scahill, in his book *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*, says that Madobe’s change of heart vis-à-vis Al Shabaab came about after he spent two years in an Ethiopian prison after he was captured while fleeing Ethiopian and American forces when the ICU fell in 2006.

In the early part of 2011, prior to joining forces with Madobe’s militia, the Kenyan government had plans to support Mohamed Abdi Mohamed “Gandhi”, the former minister of defence and an Ogadeni from the Juba region, to administer a potential Jubaland regional authority called “Azania” that would serve as a buffer zone between Kenya and Somalia. It is believed that the Ethiopian government opposed the creation of an Ogadeni-dominated authority in Jubaland (though Madobe also belongs to the Ogadeni clan) because it believed that such an entity had the potential to embolden secessionist sentiments in Ethiopia’s Ogaden region, and so Kenya – an important ally of Ethiopia – abandoned the plan.

Contradictory US policies towards Somalia

Contrary to popular belief, Kenya’s decision to invade Somalia was a “proxy war” that the US government was not willing to engage in. Wikileaks cables indicate that while the Kenyan government had been pitching the invasion to the US government for some time, it had always met resistance and scepticism. US officials were concerned that the mission could turn out to be more complicated and expensive than Kenya predicted.

It is possible that the US government realised that its support for the 2006 Ethiopian invasion of Somalia that led to the ouster of the Islamic Courts Union from Mogadishu had led to more, not less, instability; hence it did not want to repeat the same mistake. Initially, the United States had mixed feelings about the rise of the ICU, which consisted of groups of businesspeople, Muslim clerics and others who had united to bring about a semblance of governance in a dysfunctional state. The former US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, told Scahill that some

Somalia experts within the US administration welcomed the expulsion of murderous warlords in Mogadishu by the ICU. However, fears that the ICU (which had gained legitimacy through religion rather than the clan, which has been a divisive factor in Somalia) could morph into something more sinister led to a decision to remove it from power. The then US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Jendayi Frazer, is widely credited for convincing the US government to support Ethiopian forces to oust the ICU, an action that the BBC journalist Mary Harper describes as “one of the most counterproductive foreign initiatives towards Somalis in recent years”.

The potential “Talibanisation” of Somalia was probably what prompted the United States to back the Ethiopian forces that pushed the ICU out of Mogadishu in December 2006, just six months after the latter had taken control of the city. The ICU then broke up into factions, the most extreme of which was Al Shabaab, which took control over most of south and central Somalia.

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An advisor to the US military told Scahill that the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006 was a classic proxy war coordinated by the United States government, which provided air power and paid for the roughly 50,000 Ethiopian troops that ejected the ICU from Mogadishu. The invasion was in line with the US “no boots on the ground” policy, whereby the US financially supports African forces on the ground without actually sending US military personnel to the conflict zones.

However, the advisor also admitted that there were some US forces, including the CIA, on the ground in Somalia. Prior to the Ethiopian invasion, the US had started supporting a new group comprising pro-government leaders and warlords under the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism, which accepted US support in exchange for handing over key Al Qaeda members. US support for groups that were perceived as criminals or illegitimate by a large number of Somalis gained the ICU many converts.

The Ethiopian invasion was extremely costly in terms of the number of lives lost and the large scale displacement. Reports began to emerge of Ethiopian soldiers slaughtering Somali men, women and children “like goats”. Ethiopia, which has had historical and bitter disputes with Somalia for decades, and which is feared and loathed in equal measure by Somalis, was beginning to look like a brutal occupying force. Al Shabaab eventually drove out the Ethiopians in 2008. In other words, the Ethiopian invasion succeeded in replacing the ICU with a virulent and lethal force of its own making. And the United States was caught, once again, with egg on its face.

Political scientist Michael J. Boyle says that just as US efforts to eliminate Mohammed Farah Aideed had backfired in 1993, the US decision to remove the ICU was equally disastrous because it succeeded in overthrowing the only force that was capable of restoring a semblance of order on the streets of Mogadishu and other parts of Somalia. During its short reign, the ICU is credited with flushing out warlords from Mogadishu and with successfully resolving land and other disputes, which Somalia’s weak and highly corrupt Transitional Federal Government (TFG) had been unable to do since it assumed power in 2004.

Having failed to root out extremist groups from Somalia, the United States then embarked on a strategy to include the same groups within the UN-backed TFG, a move that astounded even the

most die-hard critics of US foreign policy. It is rumoured that in 2008 a senior US diplomat convinced Abdullahi Yusuf, the TFG's first president, to resign in order to pave the way for a TFG leadership comprising members of the ousted ICU, which had splintered into various groups, including Al Shabaab, that were opposed to the TFG. Having invested so heavily in Ethiopian forces to remove the ICU from Somalia, it appeared extraordinary that the United States would now be planning for its inclusion in the transitional government.

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President Abdullahi Yusuf finally ceded to US government pressure and resigned in December 2008, eight months before his tenure was to end. Subsequently, a meeting was held in Djibouti, where there is a sizeable US military presence and where Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (the leader of the ICU), Nur Adde and Maslah Siad Barre (the former Somali president Siad Barre's son), among others, were gathered to vie for the presidency of Somalia under the auspices of the United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS). Although the elections seemed to favour Barre, UNPOS, headed at that time by the Mauritanian Ould Abdallah, proposed and selected 275 additional parliamentarians drawn mainly from the ICU to the already bloated 275-member parliament. This skewed the election in favour of the ICU leader who the US government now viewed as "a moderate Islamist". "To veteran observers of Somali politics, Sharif [Sheikh Ahmed]'s re-emergence was an incredible story," wrote Scahill. "The United States had overthrown the ICU government only to later back him as the country's president."

This hoodwinking and double-dealing would later manifest itself in the Barack Obama administration's 2010 "dual-track" policy in Somalia whereby the US government dealt with the transitional government in Mogadishu while also engaging with regional and clan leaders, including warlords. Under Obama, covert operations, such as drone attacks, targeted killings and wiretapping, also escalated. Scahill claims that while Obama appeared to be scaling down operations in Guantanamo Bay, illegal detentions were being "decentralised" and "outsourced" to secret prisons in other places, including Mogadishu.

KDF blunders at home

It was against this background that the US Secretary of State for African Affairs, Johnnie Carson, told a high-powered Kenyan delegation attending an African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in January 2010 that if the Kenyan troops were defeated, there would be negative domestic repercussions. Carson wanted a more "conventional" method of addressing the Al Shabaab menace and was deeply pessimistic about Kenya's ambitions to create a buffer zone along its border. Some neighbouring countries also expressed fears that the invasion could have the unintended consequence of strengthening Al Shabaab and making Kenya more insecure.

As the critics predicted, retaliatory terrorist attacks in Kenya escalated after Kenyan forces entered Somalia in October 2011, and particularly during the first few months after the new government of President Uhuru Kenyatta was elected in 2013. An analysis by Nation Newsplex showed that there were nine times more terror attacks in the 45 months after the invasion than the 45 months before it.

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The most shocking attack took place in September 2013 at the up-market Westgate mall in Nairobi where 67 people were killed. What stood out in this and subsequent attacks was the inept response by the Kenyan security forces, including the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF). In an article published in the local press immediately after the attack, a retired military officer, Lieutenant-General Humphrey Njoroge, said that the rescue mission suffered from a broken command structure, poor screening of people fleeing the mall and outright incompetence, which may have handed the terrorists an upper hand. The blunders began in the first hours of the attack. By mid-afternoon, some three or four hours after the terrorists began their shooting spree, the US-trained anti-terrorist Recce squad seemed to have isolated and cornered the terrorists. However, the subsequent arrival of KDF soldiers may have contributed to disrupting the chain of command.

In an article published in *Foreign Policy* on the second anniversary of the attack, Tristan McConnell, a foreign correspondent based in Nairobi, claimed that by the time the Recce squad and KDF entered the mall, most of the so-called “hostages” in the mall had already been evacuated safely, thanks to the courage of a few uniformed, plainclothes and off-duty police officers who responded to emergency calls. “Far from a dramatic three-day standoff, the assault on the Westgate mall lasted only a few hours, almost all of it taking place before Kenyan security forces even entered the building,” wrote McConnell. “When they finally did, it was only to shoot at one another before going on an armed looting spree that resulted in the collapse of the rear of the building, destroyed with a rocket-propelled grenade. And there were only four gunmen, all of whom were buried in the rubble, along with much of the forensic evidence.”

Meanwhile, a judicial commission of inquiry on the three-day siege of the mall promised by President Uhuru Kenyatta has yet to materialise.

The following year, in June, more than 60 men were killed in a horrific terror attack in Mpeketoni in Lamu County. As during the Westgate attack, the security services were again implicated in bungling the rescue operation. There were stories of police stations in Mpeketoni abandoned prior to the attack and villagers left on their own to deal with the terrorists. Their frantic phone calls to the police requesting for reinforcements were apparently ignored. Many spent several nights in the bush waiting for help to arrive. Kenya’s Independent Policing Oversight Authority blamed the police for failing to heed to warnings about an imminent threat and for not responding to the villagers’ cries for help in time.

The worst attack - in terms of numbers - took place in April 2015 when 147 students at Garissa University College were butchered by Al Shabaab. Again, the security forces’ response was a little too late. According to media reports, soldiers from a military barracks in the vicinity of the university cordoned off the campus but failed to go in and rescue the students. The alarm at the base of the specially-trained Recce squad on the outskirts of Nairobi was sounded at 6 a.m. on the morning of the attack but the squad was put on standby as the military said it could handle the situation. As a result, its members arrived in Garissa nearly eleven hours later, long after a majority of the victims had been killed. Even though a core team had arrived in Garissa by 2 p.m., the rescue operation did not begin till around 5 p.m. It took the officers only half an hour to corner and kill the terrorists. If they had arrived earlier, many lives could have been saved. Most of the students’ parents blamed the delayed security response for the death of their children.

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Kenyans thought that President Kenyatta's stand on Kenya's military presence in Somalia would soften after these attacks. However, this did not happen. Kenyatta said that Kenyan forces would remain in Somalia until the government there was stable. Those demanding for a withdrawal of Kenyan troops from Somalia were labelled as "talking the language of the terrorists" and admonished as unpatriotic.

KDF blunders in Somalia

Four months after KDF entered Somalia - when it became apparent that the forces were not making substantial headway, and after the Somali government sent out feelers that it was not happy with a foreign force within Somali territory - a deal was made for the Kenyan forces to join the other African forces enrolled under the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Under the new arrangement, Kenyan troops were "re-hatted" as AMISOM, and were allowed to continue with their mission in southern Somalia. The agreement also allowed the KDF to claim compensation for equipment lost or destroyed during the invasion. According to official sources, the military operation had been costing the Kenyan government about 200 million shillings (about \$2.3 million) per month. The new arrangement, funded mainly by the United States and European countries, alleviated this heavy financial burden on the Kenyan taxpayer and also gained the mission legitimacy.

In September 2012, almost one year after the Kenyan invasion, Kismaayo, the prized port that was Al Shabaab's main economic base, fell to the Kenyan and Ras Kamboni forces. It was a major victory for the Kenyans, but one that would soon be marred by rumours of Kenyan and Ras Kamboni soldiers exporting charcoal from the port, despite a UN Security Council ban.

It is estimated that before the Kenyan and Ras Kamboni forces pushed out Al Shabaab from the port of Kismaayo, the militant group was exporting about one million bags of charcoal to the Middle East and Gulf countries every month. (Slow-burning charcoal is a much sought-after cooking fuel in the Gulf states, where it is used to roast meat and also to light fruit-flavoured waterpipes called *shisha*). When the Kenyan and Somali forces entered Kismaayo, they discovered an estimated four million sacks of charcoal with an international market value of at least \$60 million lined up ready for export. The UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea alleges that the Kenyan and Ras Kamboni forces continued exporting the charcoal despite the UN ban, and that the export of charcoal more than doubled under their watch.

In its 2014 report to the UN Security Council, the UN Monitoring Group also made the astonishing claim that revenue from the port of Kismaayo - which was being collected through taxes, charcoal exports and the importation of cheap sugar - was equally divided between the Kenyan forces, the Interim Jubaland Administration headed by Ahmed Madobe and Al Shabaab. There were also rumours of KDF and Al Shabaab entering into mutually beneficial financial partnerships at roadblocks where "taxes" were collected from vehicles.

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All these allegations, however, have been denied by the Kenyan government, but they do not surprise many Kenyans, who have still not got over the fact that Kenya's security forces indulged in a massive looting spree during the Westgate mall attack; until this attack, the Kenyan military was generally viewed as being more disciplined and less corruptible than the country's notoriously corrupt police force. As the Kenyan opposition leader Jakoyo Midiwo, who has for some time been advocating for the withdrawal of Kenya troops from Somalia, commented, "When citizens of Somalia come to realise what our soldiers are doing on their soil, they are bound to retaliate. When this happens, it is the ordinary Kenyan who will suffer."

None of these allegations affected how the KDF was viewed at home. In fact, the then Chief of the Defence Forces, General Julius Karangi, who has the look and demeanour of a chubby teddy bear rather than that of a military commander, was celebrated as a hero by the country's leadership and reports about KDF's involvement in the charcoal trade in Somalia were largely dismissed.

Part of the reason why the Kenyan forces might have got away with their alleged misdemeanours is because of the lack of a clear and strong command structure within AMISOM. Its headquarters in Mogadishu, dominated largely by Ugandan soldiers, appears to be operating independently, with little collaboration with foreign intelligence agencies or sufficient oversight by donor countries. In fact, when the allegations about illegal charcoal sales appeared in the press, there was no response or threats of withdrawal of funding for Kenyan troops from European Union countries, AMISOM's largest funders, which surprised many. This could be because the government in Mogadishu, which has the backing of the international community, is almost entirely dependent on AMISOM for security, though there are plans underway to strengthen the Somalia National Army.

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Writer Velda Felbab-Brown, in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in June 2015, explains why, despite some success in routing out Al Shabaab, the African Union forces have so far been unable to completely subdue the terrorist organisation. The main reason, she says, is because "offensive operations are decided mostly on a sector bases, with the forces in each area reporting and taking orders from their own capitals". Because of this fragmented and uncoordinated approach, there is a perception that AMISOM is politically manipulated by troop-producing countries, especially Kenya and Ethiopia. When Ethiopia joined AMISOM in 2014, some Somali analysts even wondered how a country that had invaded Somalia in 2006 could be allowed to re-enter it militarily under the banner of the African Union.

Meanwhile, more than six years after Kenyan boots entered Somalia, there seems to be no stabilisation plan for the region, nor any exit strategy for the Kenyan forces. KDF is still in Jubaland and Madobe is its president. Like the Ethiopians, who invaded Somalia in 2006 and stayed on for two years, the Kenyans have started to look and feel like an occupying force.

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For now, it appears that any decision President Uhuru Kenyatta makes regarding Kenya's presence in Somalia will be guided by what his military commanders and security experts advise him - and to a certain extent, by the countries funding AMISOM - not by a well thought-out policy to bring about long-term stability in Somalia and to forge stronger ties with the government in Mogadishu.

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