



# TO WITHDRAW OR NOT TO WITHDRAW? Reflections on Kenya's military operations in Somalia

By Paul D. Williams



On 15 January 2016 and 27 January 2017, Al Shabaab fighters stormed Kenyan military bases at El Adde and Kulbiyow, respectively. Despite [promising](#) full accounts of the battles, the Kenyan government still hasn't released comprehensive details of the dead and wounded and whether the terrorists took prisoners of war. As a consequence, speculation in the media persists. A recent newspaper [article](#), for instance, claimed that 234 Kenya Defence Force (KDF) troops were based at El Adde when al-Shabaab attacked and that 173 were killed, with another 13 taken hostage.

[My research](#) suggests these figures for the Kenyan troops killed and captured at El Adde is plausible, while around 30 died at Kulbiyow. I suspect that the [battle at El Adde](#) was the deadliest encounter in the history of modern peace operations. The full truth is unlikely to be revealed because the African Union has adopted a policy of [not publicly divulging how many of its peacekeepers have died or been wounded in Somalia](#). The Union leaves that decision to the mission's troop-contributing countries, which have refused to do so.

The anniversary of these attacks is a good time to reflect on the achievements of more than a decade of Kenyan military operations against Al Shabaab. It is also a good time to think about Kenya's

future options as the African Union Mission in Somalia ([AMISOM](#)) starts its gradual transfer of security responsibilities over to Somali forces.

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This article provides a brief overview of Kenya’s initial military intervention into Somalia in October 2011, its subsequent decision to join AMISOM, the reasons behind Al Shabaab’s successful attacks on the bases at El Adde and Kulbiyow, an assessment of the KDF operations, and a brief discussion of Kenya’s future options regarding Somalia.

## **Kenya’s 2011 intervention**

On 16 October 2011, the KDF launched Operation *Linda Nchi*. Some 2,000 troops were deployed to Somalia along three primary axes: a push towards Kismaayo along the coast via Ras Kamboni; from the border crossing at Liboi through the Somali border town of Dhobley, toward Afmadow; and from the northern Kenyan border town of Elwaq into Somalia’s Gedo region.

The [International Crisis Group](#) referred to *Linda Nchi* as “the biggest security gamble Kenya has taken since independence.” In part, this was because it represented the KDF’s first expeditionary warfare campaign. Until then, Kenya’s approach to stabilising southern Somalia revolved around its [Jubaland initiative](#)—basically, an attempt to dislodge Al Shabaab from the Juba and Gedo regions by supporting local clan militias with funding and weapons. It also followed a series of earlier operations dating back to December 2006, when the KDF embarked on Operation *Linda Mpaka* “to deter any incursion into Kenya by Al Shabaab and Islamic Courts Union.” This transitioned into Operation *Linda Mpaka II* in November 2007 to identify and deter extremist activities and prevent the infiltration of Al Shabaab sympathizers into Kenya. On 8 November 2010, Operation *Mamba* was conducted, which aimed to deter piracy along the Kenyan coastline and the Exclusive Economic Zone.

One of the [official stated aims](#) in launching *Linda Nchi* was to cripple Al Shabaab attacks inside Kenya by creating a buffer zone up to the settlement of Afmadow, an Al Shabaab stronghold. [Why Kenya launched the operation](#), however, remains a source of [debate](#). The Kenyan government subsequently claimed it was an act of self-defence in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.

The official KDF account—*Operation Linda Nchi: Kenya’s Military Experience in Somalia* (Ministry of Defence, 2014)—lauded the operation as an unequivocal military success, noting that it displaced Al Shabaab from several key towns in southern Somalia, including via an unprecedented amphibious assault to capture Kismaayo. Independent analysts, however, pointed to a range of challenges that awaited the KDF in Somalia, including how to translate military power into [political effects](#) and how to prevent “[blowback](#)” in the form of increased Al Shabaab attacks back home. The Kenyan intervention, like the Jubaland initiative before it, also generated tensions with Ethiopia because it empowered the Ogaden clan. This clan had powerful connections among Nairobi’s political elite and Ethiopia’s government worried that Kenyan support would strengthen the Ogaden National Liberation Front’s (ONLF) rebellion in its own Somali-dominated region. (In 1977, Siad Barre had even invaded this region in a bid to liberate it from Ethiopia to form what is known as the “Greater Somalia”.)

## **Kenya joins AMISOM**

As it turned out, *Linda Nchi* didn't last long. In early December 2011, Kenya decided to join AMISOM. But President Mwai Kibaki's government didn't sign an official Memorandum of Understanding with the African Union to that effect until June 2012. [My research](#) suggests that while the Kenyan government initially sought to address the security and economic problems raised by Al Shabaab unilaterally – without joining AMISOM – it changed this position for two principal reasons: to gain the mantle of multilateral legitimacy for continued operations, and to ease the financial burden of its military operation.

Since then, the KDF operated mainly in AMISOM's Sector 2 and Kismaayo. For about eighteen months from mid-2013, the KDF were co-deployed with a battalion of troops from Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leonean contingent subsequently withdrew in January 2015 because of the Ebola pandemic back home. More recently, a small number of troops from other AMISOM- contributing countries have also been deployed alongside the KDF in Kismaayo. But it is fair to say that within these two sectors the KDF continued to call the shots. Indeed, this was the KDF's plan all along – to create areas of responsibility for each of AMISOM's troop-contributing countries where they could operate as they saw fit.

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In addition to its activities within AMISOM, KDF also subsequently undertook other operations against Al Shabaab. Some of these were conducted inside Kenya, including operations at the Westgate Mall, Garissa University, and in Boni Forest. However, all of these activities raised some important, and as yet unresolved, domestic [legal issues](#).

Kenyan military aircraft have also engaged in intermittent air strikes in Somalia since 2011. Importantly, these air operations were not conducted as part of AMISOM. It was not until [mid-December 2016](#) that AMISOM received its first military helicopters, despite being authorised an aviation component of twelve in [February 2012](#). These three Kenyan MD-500 helicopters were supposed to be AMISOM mission assets for use by the Force Commander. In practice, however, these helicopters operated almost entirely within the KDF's areas of operations within AMISOM.

### **El Adde and Kulbiyow**

El Adde was one of dozens of remote AMISOM forward operating bases spread across south-central Somalia garrisoned by about a company of troops. AMISOM spent considerable time, effort and resources trying to secure the main supply routes connecting these bases. It was not just KDF bases that were vulnerable. In June and September 2015, for example, Al Shabaab overran two AMISOM bases garrisoned by Burundian and Ugandan troops at Leego and Janaale, respectively. In both these cases, Al Shabaab fighters stormed the base just before dawn using a combination of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), armoured pick-up trucks (also known as “technicals”) and massed light infantry. Al Shabaab cameramen filmed the attacks and later produced propaganda videos of them.

On 15 January 2016, the fighters used the same tactics to storm the KDF base at El Adde. I suspect nearly 170 KDF soldiers were killed and perhaps a dozen were taken hostage. In an [earlier report](#), I argued that Al Shabaab's success at El Adde exposed a number of problems hindering KDF

operations. These included: the vulnerability of newly deployed rotations of troops; failure to adapt to known Al Shabaab tactics, notably the use of VBIEDs; failure to provide timely support to friendly units; AMISOM's lack of a secure military communications system; poor relations with the local Somali security forces and civilian population; failure to detect Al Shabaab preparations for the attack; as well as poor base defences.

At [Kulbiyow](#), about 120 KDF troops were attacked on 27 January 2017 in precisely the same way as the earlier attacks on AMISOM bases. Once again, after some resistance, the [KDF defenders](#) retreated from the base, Al Shabaab looted it, and then Kenyan reinforcements were able to recapture it later. Both battles were the subject of Al Shabaab propaganda videos and both generated [controversy](#) and [confusion](#) back in Kenya, in part because of the lack of official clarity about the details and casualties.

### **Assessing KDFs operations**

How successful have Kenya's military operations in Somalia been? Apart from the obvious loss of life and financial cost, the record is mixed and debatable.

KDF's actions have shown that the military is a blunt instrument for dealing with political problems. We must remember that Al Shabaab is first and foremost a political problem stemming from poor Somali governance and the grievances associated with it. Nor has Kenya's intervention fundamentally altered the clan dynamics and conflicts which Al Shabaab exploits to retain relevance.

On the positive side, KDF operations initially weakened Al Shabaab by becoming part of a three-pronged offensive with AMISOM pushing out of Mogadishu and Ethiopian troops advancing across central Somalia. These operations displaced Al Shabaab from dozens of urban settlements, thereby reducing the group's ability to govern large numbers of Somali civilians and to obtain economic revenues. They also killed the idea that Al Shabaab was invincible.

The Somalia campaign has also given the KDF its first taste of war-fighting, which is usually a painful but necessary experience in the development of all armed forces.

On the other hand, there are more negative consequences. First, the KDF's actions have shown that the military is a blunt instrument for dealing with political problems. We must remember that [Al Shabaab](#) is first and foremost a political problem stemming from poor Somali governance and the grievances associated with it. Nor has Kenya's intervention fundamentally altered the clan dynamics and conflicts which Al Shabaab exploits to retain relevance.

Second, the KDF's operations have failed to achieve their principal objective: to help create an effective buffer zone to keep Al Shabaab out of Kenya. Indeed, the [severity of Al Shabaab attacks inside Kenya](#) increased after the 2011 intervention. However, this [may not be directly because of the intervention](#) but rather due to characteristics of Kenyan domestic politics and Al Shabaab's opportunistic recruiting strategies.

Third, as noted above, Kenyan support for members of the Ogaden clan in Jubaland caused tensions with Ethiopia, which resented how this might embolden the rebel ONLF. Tensions have flared intermittently when Nairobi and Addis Ababa support competing local Somalis to advance their national priorities.

Fourth, the KDF operations have generated several controversies beyond the battles at El Adde and



Kulbiyow. Among the most notable are persistent allegations that the KDF has played an unhelpful role in maintaining the illicit trade in various commodities, including [charcoal](#) and [sugar](#). Some of the revenues are said to benefit Al Shabaab and charcoal has been under UN Security Council embargo since [Resolution 2036](#) (22 February 2012). KDF forces both within and operating outside of AMISOM have also been [accused](#) of causing harm to civilians, including through unilateral air strikes conducted outside of AMISOM.

Given that the Somali federal government is currently in turmoil on a range of issues and its security forces remain in a dire state, AMISOM's transition will not be rapid. There is simply no quick or easy way for AMISOM to leave Somalia responsibly.

Finally, KDF failed to mount an effective strategic communications campaign to counter Al Shabaab's propaganda. The secrecy has usually been defended as necessary for national security and the morale of the troops. Critics have been derided as unpatriotic and Al Shabaab sympathizers. Ironically, some of al-Shabaab's most [effective videos](#) and other propaganda media have used the lies and obscurantism of Kenyan leaders to boost their own false narratives.

### **Future options**

The KDF's Somalia campaign has periodically gained the spotlight in Kenyan domestic politics, although understandably, it has lately taken a back seat in the aftermath of the controversial 2017 presidential election. President Uhuru Kenyatta's usual position is that KDF must stay in Somalia [until the job is done](#). But he has also threatened to withdraw his forces from AMISOM, following the European Union's reduction of allowances payments and [criticism](#) from the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia. Some members of the opposition had also called for the KDF's withdrawal well [before](#) the disaster at El Adde. The issue still [divides](#) Kenyans more broadly. However, neither side of the debate has a convincing plan to defeat Al Shabaab. This is the key problem - Kenyan forces, no matter how effective, cannot defeat this group; this is a job only Somalis can finish.

This debate is likely to intensify once again now that AMISOM has started thinking more seriously about the details of its conditions-based [exit strategy](#). As set out in UN Security Council [Resolution 2372](#) (30 August 2017), AMISOM and its partners are trying to build "a capable, accountable, acceptable, and affordable Somali-led security sector" to enable the mission to gradually transfer security responsibilities to Somali forces and eventually leave. Resolution 2372 specified that AMISOM should withdraw 1,000 troops by 31 December 2017 but deploy an additional 500 police officers. AMISOM's leadership worked out a deal whereby each contributing country would withdraw 4% of its troops, which for the KDF would mean about 160 soldiers.

Given that the Somali federal government is currently in turmoil on a range of issues and its security forces remain in a dire state, AMISOM's transition will not be rapid. There is simply no quick or easy way for AMISOM to leave Somalia responsibly. Instead, the mission faces a number of [difficult dilemmas](#), including when and how to leave, how to finance its operations in the interim, and how to transfer security responsibilities to a set of Somali forces that remain divided by clan politics and which are woefully equipped. These challenges are further complicated by endemic corruption at the highest levels of Somali politics.

At the strategic level, Kenya's government should push the Somali federal government and the regional states to implement the new national security architecture and London Security Pact signed in May 2017.

For Kenya, the stakes are considerable but there are no great options. Obviously, the status quo isn't ideal, with Al Shabaab attacks persisting and regular casualties among both the KDF and Kenyan citizens. But it could be worse. The KDF operations are still supported financially by the [European Union](#) and receive logistics support from the UN Support Office in Somalia ([UNSOS](#)). The KDF also continues to receive significant security assistance from the US, UK and other partners, in part because of its role in AMISOM. However, following the [European Union's decision](#) to reduce the amount of allowances it pays to AMISOM troops by 20% from January 2016, KDF soldiers aren't receiving fair compensation for the risks they are assuming while fighting against what both the UN Security Council and the African Union have identified as a major threat to international peace and security.

On the other hand, if the allegations are true that the KDF's leadership is profiting from the illicit trade in charcoal, sugar and other commodities, then there is a strong financial incentive to stay put. The Kenyan contingent has become less popular with local Somalis, according to [opinion polls](#) conducted between 2014 and 2016, and several partners have expressed their concerns. But so far, the KDF has largely brushed off the negative publicity.

So, if the KDF stays put, the key question becomes how it can help build effective Somali security forces. At the strategic level, Kenya's government should push the Somali federal government and the regional states to implement the new national security architecture and [London Security Pact](#) signed in May 2017. At the operational level, given their areas of deployment, the KDF can really only play a significant role with the Jubaland forces since the Somali National Army has a minimal presence in this region. The alternative is for Kenya to cede any role in this area to another actor that might step forward to take the lead in developing the Somali army.

There's also an additional dilemma: If AMISOM and its partners manage to build an effective set of Somali security forces and subsequently withdraw, will the Al Shabaab threats facing Kenya disappear? And even if Kenya was to withdraw from AMISOM, would it leave without its envisaged buffer zone and still have to address a range of domestic issues that explain how and why many Kenyan citizens join or support Al Shabaab?

In sum, there are no great future options for Kenya's engagement in Somalia. Kenya took a security gamble in 2011 which hasn't entirely paid off.

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