The Undeclared War in Somalia

By Rasna Warah

While the United States was waging what appeared to be a losing war against COVID-19 (as of 12 April, the death toll in the US was nearly 20,000, the highest in the world), its military was carrying out a high-tech battle against Al Shabaab thousands of miles away. On 7 April, the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) confirmed through a press release that Yusuf Jiis, described as “one of the foundational members of the terrorist group”, was killed in an air strike on 2 April. The strike occurred in the vicinity of Bush Madina in Somalia’s Bay region, approximately 135 miles west of Mogadishu.

This was the second time that a “high value” Al Shabaab target was killed in a US air strike. In 2014, the influential Al Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane was also killed in an air strike. It was assumed that Godane’s death would weaken the group and reduce its capacity to carry out terrorist activities, but this did not happen. Terrorist attacks in Somalia – and in Kenya – continued and resulted in scores of deaths.

“Al Shabaab remains a disease in Somalia and is an indiscriminate killer of innocent people and their only desire is to brutalise populations inside Somalia and outside of Somalia”, said US Army Maj. Gen. William Gayler, AFRICOM’s director of operations, who was quoted in the press release. “Putting pressure on this network helps contain their ambition and desire to cause harm”.

AFRICOM commander, Gen. Stephen Townsend, stated, “While we might like to pause our
operations because of the Coronavirus, the leaders of al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab and ISIS have announced that they see the crisis as an opportunity to further their terrorist agenda so we will continue to stand with and support our African partners”.

The 2 April air strike was probably a response to the Al Shabaab attack on the US Manda Bay base in Lamu County in Kenya on 5 January this year. An American soldier and two US contractors were killed in that attack. The base, known as Camp Simba, is situated along the shores of the Indian Ocean, not far from the Somalia border. The Americans were killed when a rocket-propelled grenade hit a plane piloted by contractors from L3 Technologies, an American company hired by the Pentagon to carry out surveillance missions in Somalia.

It is unclear whether any Kenyans were killed in the attack, as the Kenyan government is notoriously secretive about Kenyan casualties, especially those involving the Kenya Defence Force (KDF). However, there were rumours that Kenyan soldiers hid behind bushes when the attack was taking place, and did not make any attempt to fire at the terrorists, which left the US soldiers frustrated and dumbfounded.

There were no investigations by the local media on how the terrorist outfit managed to enter a secure US military installation and shoot at not just a plane, but also at a few stationary helicopters and even a fuel storage area. However, the New York Times did establish that injured Americans were flown to Djibouti (where AFRICOM has a base) for treatment. The New York Times further estimated that “the attack most likely cost the Pentagon millions of dollars in damages”.

The killing of Jiis was barely reported in the local or international press, but what is clear is that despite a looming health crisis at home, the US has not reduced its military operations abroad. According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracy’s Long War Journal, AFRICOM actually stepped up its air campaign against Al Shabaab in the first three months of this year, targeting the group 33 times in 2020 (more than half of 2019’s total). Samar al-Bulishi, a US-based expert on the “War on Terror” in East Africa, believes that “Al Shabaab’s actions [in Manda Bay] are a likely response to the United States’ rapidly expanding undeclared war in Somalia”.

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Since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC, the US has also employed drone technology and “surgical strikes” against suspected terrorists in Somalia, which became more common during President Barack Obama’s administration. AFRICOM, which began operations in 2007, and which is headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany, has been key in carrying out US military operations in Africa.

Many of these operations are not known because they are carried out via drones and not through direct combat. It is estimated that US drone attacks have killed between 900 and 1,000 Somalis in the past three years alone and that the Pentagon carried out 63 drone attacks in Somalia last year. Amnesty International has been documenting these drone attacks and claims that many of the casualties are, in fact, civilians, not terrorists. This has raised questions about whether such attacks are counterproductive in that they generate fear and loathing of the US government among the general civilian population.

Dual track policy

The United States government’s policies towards Somalia have been largely shaped by its
experiences there in the early 1990s and by President George Bush’s “war on terror” following the 11 September 2001 terror attacks in New York and Washington DC.

The US withdrew its troops from Somalia in 1993 after the October “Black Hawk Down” incident, also known as “the Battle of Mogadishu”, which led to the death of eighteen US soldiers in Mogadishu. This led to the “no-American-boots-on-the-ground” policy. This policy entailed financially supporting African forces on the ground to act on behalf of the United States, but not actually sending US military personnel to the conflict zones. This policy has in recent years been implemented through the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), which is largely funded by the European Union and supported by the United Nations and the United States.

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Since 2010, the US has also adopted a “dual track” policy in Somalia, whereby the US government deals with both the Somali government in Mogadishu while simultaneously engaging with regional entities and clan leaders. This policy has led to the bizarre and counter-productive scenario whereby former warlords and militia leaders are on the payroll of the US while they simultaneously engage with a government they oppose or undermine.

American investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill says that the US policy towards Somali warlords and terrorists has been contradictory and quite often self-defeating. In an article published in the online The Nation magazine in September 2011, the journalist claimed that several Somali warlords have for years been backed and armed by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in violation of a UN Security Council arms embargo imposed on Somalia when the civil war started.

In its war against Al Shabaab, the United States has also relied on Somalia’s most pro-West neighbours, namely, Ethiopia and Kenya, for support. Kenya is currently the largest recipient of US security assistance in sub-Saharan Africa. About 200 military personnel are stationed in Kenya (mostly in Manda Bay) to train Kenyan military personnel. This and the fact that the US and the European Union support the Kenya Defence Force (KDF) in Somalia is why Kenya finds it so difficult to withdraw its forces from Somalia - too much money is at stake. (If Kenya had to use its own resources to keep its troops in Somalia, it might have withdrawn its forces as soon as it achieved its mission of liberating the Somali port city of Kismaayo from Al Shabaab’s clutches in 2012.)

Folly of the Kenyan incursion

Kenya’s military operations in Somalia have been problematic from the start. In a video that was recently posted on social media, the late Kofi Annan talks about why he warned Kenya against militarily intervening in Somalia. Annan stated that when he was in the midst of negotiating a peace deal between the government and the opposition after the bloody 2007 elections in Kenya, there was already talk in Kenyan government circles of Kenyan troops entering Somalia.

Annan advised the then government of Mwai Kibaki to not entertain such an idea because it would create insuperable conflicts of interest – not only because Kenya is Somalia’s neighbour, but the country also hosts a sizeable ethnic Somali population that would be forced to take sides if Kenya’s incursion into Somalia got ugly. Kibaki ignored this advice and sent Kenyan forces into Somalia in October 2011.

Kenya’s invasion of Somalia had at least two devastating impacts. One, Al Shabaab terrorist attacks on Kenyan soil became more frequent and more deadly, as witnessed during the Westgate mall
attack in September 2013, the Garissa University College attack in April 2015, and the attack on the DusitD2 complex in Nairobi last year, which killed a combined total of more than 200 people. US military and other installations in Kenya are also becoming more vulnerable to attack, as witnessed in Manda Bay.

Two, Kenya’s support of the Jubaland leader Ahmed Madobe has created a perception that Kenya is interested in ruling Jubaland by proxy by installing an ally there. This has led to mistrust between the weak but internationally recognised Federal Government of Somalia and the Government of Kenya – a suspicion made worse by Somalia’s dispute with Kenya over maritime waters in the Indian Ocean.

The taking of sides in an internal conflict has made Kenya’s border areas with Jubaland in southern Somalia more, not less, insecure. This became evident in March this year in Mandera, along the Kenya-Somalia border, where a conflict seems to be brewing between the Jubaland forces loyal to the Jubaland leader Ahmed Madobe and the Somalia National Army forces under the command of President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo. Some sources claim that this is a clan-based war between Madobe’s Ogaden-dominated forces and the Marehan, the clan to which Farmajo belongs. However, it is difficult to assess the situation on the ground because neither the Kenyan nor the Somali government have made a statement on the conflict along Kenya’s border area, except that some sort of stalemate/ceasefire has been agreed upon (apparently mediated by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed).

However, according to Rashid Abdi, the former Horn of Africa Project Director at the International Crisis Group, the conflict is likely an attempt by President Farmajo to reconfigure local politics ahead of the Somali elections later this year (that is, if they do take place, given the coronavirus pandemic). Farmajo would like to assert his authority on the various federal Somali states, especially in Jubaland, which is run virtually autonomously by Madobe with little reference to Mogadishu, and with a heavy Kenya Defence Force presence.

Madobe ascended to power in September 2012 when Kismaayo, the prized port that was Al Shabaab’s main economic base, fell to Kenyan and Madobe’s Ras Kamboni forces. It was a major victory for the Kenyans, and also ensured that Madobe became the region’s kingpin.

In May 2013, Madobe declared himself president of the self-styled state of Jubaland, which was not recognised by the central government in Mogadishu. An “election” in October 2019, saw him reassert his authority in the region (though it must be said that Al Shabaab still controls large parts of the territory).

Lessons from Afghanistan

Lessons must be learned from the US military operations abroad since 9/11. The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq may have led to short-term gains, but proved devastating in the long-term. The Iraqi people have suffered sectarian conflict for decades, and more recently have had to endure the brutality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Iraq is more unstable now than it was under Saddam Hussein. It is must be remembered that the founder of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, spent four years in Camp Bucca, a US detention centre in southern Iraq during the war waged in 2003 by President George Bush and his ally Prime Minister Tony Blair. It is believed that his imprisonment at the camp instilled in him the idea of an “Islamic Caliphate”, the stated goal of ISIS.
US military operations abroad have had the net effect of increasing, not decreasing, the terrorist activities of fundamentalist Islamic groups such as ISIS, which appears to not have been completely defeated, but to have merely gone underground. US military interventions have increased levels of conflict, especially in Iraq, and led to much bloodshed. In Afghanistan, the prolonged US military presence served to unify and strengthen the Taliban. Civilian deaths in drone attacks also created mistrust of the US government, whose military operations in neighbouring Pakistan have also been criticised.

It would be unfortunate if Somalia became another Afghanistan, where nearly two decades after the US invasion and subsequent heavy US military presence, the Taliban, rather than being vanquished, has emerged as a stronger and more emboldened political force.