



Revealed: The CIA and MI6's Secret War in Kenya

By Namir Shabibi



The following is an abridged version of a two-part investigation. Read the full investigations here: [Part 1](#) & [Part 2](#). Republication courtesy of [Declassified UK](#) / the [Daily Maverick](#).

A day before being killed in August last year, 45-year-old motorcycle taxi driver, Mohamed 'Modi' Mwatsumiro was heard arguing with his wife at their tin roof dwelling in the small town of Ngombeni, on the south coast of Kenya. Modi had ordered her to leave with their young child and stay with her family.

It is not known if Modi feared he was a marked man, but Kenyan police suspected he was linked to a suicide bomber involved in the DusitD2 hotel complex terrorist attack in Nairobi in January 2019, which killed [21 people](#) including a US citizen. The attack was conducted by Somalia-based group al-Shabaab, which is [designated](#) as a terrorist organisation by the US and British governments, among others.

Eight months later, on 30 August, the same Kenyan paramilitary team that swept in to repel the DusitD2 attackers reappeared in unmarked vehicles, this time at Modi's mud-stone home.

At just after 4am, commandos arrived armed with US-made assault rifles and pistols, and stormed Modi's home. Modi hurled a grenade that failed to detonate, police later claimed. Seldom does a

suspect emerge alive in such raids. Modi was no exception.

A covert war

The commandos belonged to the Rapid Response Team (RRT), a clandestine 'special team' of the Kenyan paramilitary General Service Unit's Recce Company. The RRT was set up, equipped, trained and is guided on tactical counter-terror operations by America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), a *Declassified UK* investigation can reveal.

Informally known as the Rendition Operations Team, the RRT is composed of around 60 police commandos.

The CIA's covert programme, which began in 2004, is managed by a paramilitary liaison officer at the US embassy in Kenya's capital Nairobi, but has until now successfully avoided public scrutiny.

The creation of the RRT was "an indigenous solution to an indigenous problem", a former senior CIA counter-terrorism official told *Declassified*. "It puts a unit under our control for when we have targets that we feel need to go down."

Based on interviews with over two dozen CIA, US State Department and Kenyan intelligence, paramilitary and police officers, this investigation has found that in its 16 years of operation, the CIA-backed team has been responsible for the capture of high value terror suspects, as well as rendition operations, killings and alleged summary executions.

Clandestine Kenyan team has been paid and assisted by the CIA to take down terror suspects since 2004.

The American and British governments provide covert support to Kenya in order to help it defeat al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda-linked group that has carried out dozens of deadly attacks in Kenya. Its most high profile atrocities have been on Nairobi's Westgate shopping mall in 2013, where it [killed](#) 67 people and on Garissa University in 2015 which [killed](#) 148.

While the precise number of RRT kill or capture raids against terror suspects is unknown due to the clandestine nature of the force's operations, *Declassified* has investigated over a dozen cases.

In many instances, suspects raided by the RRT have ended up dead, with a police spokesperson subsequently claiming the target was armed and dangerous. But this investigation has also found cases of mistaken killings and alleged summary executions.

"The present government targets [people] in extrajudicial killings", former Kenyan vice president, Kalonzo Musyoka said. Describing the killings as "unconstitutional", he added, "This has spread bitterness...but because we are doing the bidding of the West in the war on terror, they are allowed to."

Khelef Khalifa, chair of Kenyan human rights organisation Muhuri, said: "When these extrajudicial killings happen, Muslims feel they are under siege because they cannot comprehend why the government cannot arrest these people and take them to court, instead of killing them."

Mistaken killing

On 28 October 2012, the RRT conducted another pre-dawn raid, this time in Kenya's coastal town of

Mombasa. The team was hunting for Fuad Abubakar Manswab, the alleged mastermind of a foiled 2011 terror attack in Mombasa. Manswab was thought to be “armed and dangerous,” a Kenyan officer said, and the RRT were instructed to “eliminate” him.

But an intelligence informant had mistakenly led the paramilitary team to the home of Omar Faraj, who worked as a cashier at a local butcher.

Unaware they were targeting the wrong home, RRT commandos broke down the door and fired tear gas inside. Faraj’s wife, Rahma Ali, remembers watching the officers open fire on her husband, who was balanced on a flowerpot trying to climb the wall. They hit him in the temple, and he fell back on top of her, blood streaming from his head. Faraj died but his wife survived.

Current and former members of the RRT stressed their objectives prioritise capture over killing. However, they all confirmed that any perceived threat or resistance from targets is to be met with lethal force.

“When we were trained on threats, we were taught human rights come later. If you have this bad guy and you cannot get him for interrogation then you’d better execute [him]”, said one of a dozen current and former Kenyan paramilitary officers who spoke on condition of anonymity.

When suspects disappear or turn up dead, the Kenyan government rarely undertakes a formal investigation. According to Maria Burnett, former East Africa director for Human Rights Watch, out of hundreds of extrajudicial killings that have taken place during counter-terrorism operations in Kenya in recent years, “only a small handful” had been seriously scrutinised.

The former senior US official said, “There’s never a real investigation by the Kenyan government. They don’t want to get to the bottom of it. It’s just not going to happen.”

Sometimes, though, targets are taken alive. In 2010, Kenyan police kidnapped and rendered the suspected militants behind the al-Shabaab-inspired [bombings](#) of a rugby club and restaurant in Kampala, Uganda, to face interrogation by American, British and Ugandan agents.

One RRT officer recalled a US-sponsored rendition operation to Uganda. RRT operatives captured the suspect in Nairobi, drove him overland to the western border, and then handed him over to their Ugandan counterparts. The CIA handlers “even gave us fuel for the vehicles and our upkeep all the journey”, an RRT officer said.

The US and UK hand

Housed at a secretive base in the town of Ruiru, east of Nairobi, the CIA paramilitary liaison provides the RRT with regular financial support, including allowances for operations and bonuses for successful missions. RRT officers confirmed receiving the equivalent of a 30% “boost” to their salaries per month.

The RRT also receives weapons and equipment from the CIA, including M4 carbines, pistols, grenade launchers, body armour, and CS grenades.

RRT sources independently confirmed that the team is not to be deployed by its Kenyan command for tactical anti-terror operations without the knowledge and consent of its US embassy handlers. The exceptions are for rapid response to high-profile terror attacks and for the diplomatic protection of foreign dignitaries.

Setting the RRT up, in 2004 the CIA paid for 18 commandos - dubbed ‘Team 18’ - to fly to the US for

SWAT-style training in rendition and disruption operations, including surveillance, storming a building, close-quarter battle, and weapons handling at locations that include Annapolis Naval Academy in Maryland. The CIA has provided advanced versions of the training to dozens of RRT paramilitary officers over the past 16 years.

But the CIA paramilitary liaison, based at the US embassy in Nairobi, is also directly involved in planning some of the RRT's operations. Occasionally, CIA operatives themselves have participated in operations by helping to plan raids and track the target. "If they really, really want the results, they will even assist directly," one mid-ranking Kenyan paramilitary officer said.

Members of the secretive Kenyan team say their American handlers have done little to hold it accountable as its operational tempo increased dramatically after Kenya's 2011 [invasion](#) of Somalia provoked a wave of domestic terror attacks.

Working closely with its counterparts at the Counterterrorism Unit of Kenya's National Intelligence Service (NIS), the CIA identifies suspects and prepares target packages - intelligence and analysis on a given suspect - that include actionable intelligence.

In formulating the target packages, CIA officers in Nairobi work closely with MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, which relies on its long-standing human intelligence network to find and track targets and infiltrate militant circles.

"The Brits were worried", a former senior CIA counter-terrorism official said, noting the influx of British 'jihadi tourism' to Somalia, via Kenya, after 2010. "Because they had a lot of British cases and I mean British citizens. In some respect I think the British kids were showing up there before some of our guys, before the American citizens started going to be suicide bombers."

Unlike the CIA, actionable intelligence from MI6 does not reach the RRT paramilitaries directly, but through its CIA and NIS counterparts.

MI6 also collaborates with a team of Kenyan intelligence officers, as part of a liaison cell within NIS' Counter-terrorism Unit, codenamed ARCTIC, Kenyan and US intelligence officials confirmed. At times, the NIS ARCTIC cell works directly with RRT operatives in finding targets and fixing their location before sending in the paramilitary team.

Avoiding detection

Multiple RRT officers, who operate in plainclothes when on tactical counter-terror assignments, admitted using unmarked cars hired from private companies and swapping between private or unregistered number plates, in order to avoid identification.

Declassified has also learned that since 2004, RRT operatives have disguised themselves as aid workers when on operation in refugee camps such as Dadaab in eastern Kenya or Kakuma in the northwest.

Britain's MI6 plays a key role in identifying suspects for a 'kill or capture' list and finding and fixing their location.

Maria Burnett said she had "long-standing concerns that some Kenyan security forces make considerable efforts to conceal their identity, especially during counter-terrorism operations." She added: "Such efforts are not only contrary to Kenyan law; they ultimately work to shield perpetrators

of abuses from any shred of accountability.”

Defenders of the RRT say it has been instrumental in neutralising the threat from al-Shabaab. While the Kenyan and international press have made no mention of the RRT’s central role in counter-terrorism operations, multiple US and RRT sources confirmed that the CIA-supported team played a lead role in successfully neutralising the Garissa and DusitD2 attackers.

However, while al-Shabaab’s attack on DusitD2 claimed fewer casualties than the earlier Westgate and Garissa attacks, experts [described](#) the raid as “representing a new and dangerous phase in the group’s evolution”, since it was the first major operation relying on Kenyan nationals of non-Somali descent.

“We are being hit all the time. Because we are being seen as pro-American, pro-West”, former Kenyan vice president Kalonzo Musyoka said. “It’s not a matter of if, but a matter of when we get attacked again. For as long as we have our troops inside Somalia.”

Paramilitaries use covert tactics such as fake number plates and disguise themselves as aid workers, which “shield perpetrators of abuses from any shred of accountability”.

He added, “Extrajudicial killings push people underground. People say ‘OK, this is how our relatives have been killed. We shall take revenge!’...There is nothing that really radicalises [more] than taking somebody out in a manner that is not in accordance with the law.”

“Heavy-handed tactics seem to have become more pronounced in response to the terrorist threat following [the] Westgate [attack],” another former US ambassador Michael Ranneberger said. “All of this, of course, is linked to the culture of impunity, and heavy-handed tactics contribute towards radicalisation.”

The CIA, the US embassy in Nairobi, the Kenyan Police Service, and the Kenyan Ministry of the Interior, did not respond to requests for comment. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office said, “We don’t comment on intelligence matters.” DM

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Read the full length two-part investigation online at: declassifieduk.org

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