



The Militarisation of US/Africa Policy: How the CIA Came To Lead Deadly Counter-Terrorism Operations in Kenya

By Namir Shabibi



Republication courtesy of [Declassified UK](#) / the [Daily Maverick](#). First published by *Declassified UK* on 28 August 2020.

A CIA-backed paramilitary police unit uncovered by *Declassified UK* – known as the Rapid Response Team (RRT) – is at the heart of US efforts to combat terrorism in Kenya. The revelations come as deaths of US military personnel in an [attack](#) by the al-Shabaab terrorist group earlier this year on a base in northeast Kenya, are refocusing attention on America’s expanded military and intelligence footprint in Africa.

The story behind the RRT’s development, from a nascent force initially designed to undertake renditions of high-value or high-risk terror suspects, to the go-to tactical counter-terror team in Kenya behind a number of controversial killings, has been recounted to *Declassified* by US and Kenyan diplomatic, intelligence and paramilitary personnel.

The RRT team’s establishment dates back to 2004, long before Kenya had become embroiled in Somalia’s civil war and al-Shabaab had begun attacks inside Kenya.

Henry Crumpton, who served as deputy chief of operations at the CIA counterterrorism center and retired as State Department counterterrorism coordinator in 2007, said the “imperative” to take a more aggressive stance against Islamist extremists in East Africa emerged in the late 1990s.

“We [the CIA] didn’t really get a wake-up call until August 1998,” Crumpton told *Declassified*, referring to the twin [bombings](#) that month at the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that killed over 200 people, including 12 US citizens.

“I think it’s important to note what happened in August of ‘98 because Kenya has been on the frontline. If you go back further; if you look at the attacks against US forces in Somalia [in 1993] and before that even, I think that US policymakers and leaders and certainly citizens don’t remember or know or appreciate the role Kenya has played going back to the nineties,” Crumpton said.

Michael Ranneberger, the US ambassador to Kenya during 2006-2011, agreed the country was and remains a pivotal player in the fight against al Qaeda-aligned militants.

“Kenya is a strategically very important country for the United States. Not just in terms of the fight against terrorism, but its location on the East African coast - with the largest [US] embassy in Africa and one of the largest in the world - and that’s because we do a lot of our regional activity from that embassy,” he said.

After the 1998 bombings, the director of the CIA’s new counterterrorism centre, Cofer Black, began taking “a much more aggressive view” of the agency’s approach to its relationships with African law enforcement agencies, Crumpton said.

“If you look at how the CIA approaches liaison relationships, in the late ‘90s it really accelerated beyond just gathering information, and rapidly evolved into integrated operations,” said Crumpton, who led CIA operations in Afghanistan in 2001-2002.

By 1998, Crumpton had been seconded by the CIA to deputy chief of the FBI’s international terrorism operations section. Facing a terror case in the US involving a Somali suspect, he recalled reaching out to his Kenyan partners for help.

“They sent us a Kenyan policeman - ethnic Somali - who was integrated into the FBI investigation, which was of enormous help. And that was just a small step in what would become a rapidly intimate relationship among intelligence and law enforcement officials, where it’s not just sharing information, it’s really integrated operations,” Crumpton explained.

“There are hundreds if not thousands of examples of this type of deep cooperation.”

One key US figure tasked with developing the diplomatic groundwork for the integrated operations in Kenya was William Bellamy, US ambassador to the country from 2003-2006.

The covert Kenyan Rapid Response Team (RRT) was established as part of the CIA’s “intimate integration” programme to train and manage local paramilitaries in terrorism hotspots around the globe

Bellamy recalled arriving in the Kenyan capital Nairobi feeling that the country was “a high-value target for al-Qaeda in East Africa”. Increasingly concerned about the possible spread of terrorism across the region, the US government set aside a “large pot of money” for counter-terrorism assistance, Bellamy told *Declassified*.

However, he added that efforts to persuade the Kenyan government's law enforcement and military agencies to buy into America's war on terror proved "a real hard sell". The police and military agencies were beset by "too much interagency rivalry and suspicion" and, to the former ambassador's "biggest frustration", a proposed multi-agency centre for counter-terrorism never got off the ground.

Another former senior CIA official with knowledge of Kenyan counter-terror operations at the time recalled: "Western governments were throwing a lot of resources at the Kenyans. That [extremism] was something we were all trying to get ahead of and not allow al-Qaeda or any other successor groups to get a foothold there."

The former official added: "We were definitely trying but I think the Kenyans were a little reluctant, and I think that was just because they knew it would be a rough fight... Now it seems it's like a whole government strategy."

Former Kenyan Foreign Minister and Vice President, Kalonzo Musyoka, explained: "Kenya's positioning, when I was foreign minister [2003-2004], was that of absolute neutrality in the regional conflicts... that's why we were trusted with the role of mediation. We had taken a view that as a frontline state with a 1,800km border with Somalia, which is unpatrolled, we would be making a mistake to engage directly by sending our troops into Somalia."

Despite the difficulty faced by former ambassador Bellamy in dealing with his Kenyan counterparts, their National Intelligence Service (NIS, then known as NSIS) was nonetheless eager to develop counter-terrorism collaboration, and was the CIA's liaison for the development of integrated operations.

Establishing the covert team

The unit that would later become the Rapid Response Team (RRT) was a product of this outreach. Part of a secret CIA programme to train and manage local paramilitaries in numerous hotspots around the globe, from Afghanistan to Georgia, the team began with just 18 officers - dubbed 'Team 18' - who were selected by Kenyan police and intelligence to receive elite training in the United States.

A former senior US government official with knowledge of the RRT's establishment said, "On something of this sensitivity and this importance... we would need to run it through the Agency [CIA] and through [Kenya's] NIS."

NIS, with extensive links to Britain's MI6, were "professional, capable, serious people. And they were our best partners, the most reliable partners", the former senior official said.

The new recruits to the RRT, who would become Kenya's first paramilitary police squad dedicated primarily to counter-terrorism operations, were then flown to training facilities in the US. Landing at Dulles International Airport in Washington DC, the CIA handlers advised the RRT trainees to tell immigration officials they were visiting the country on a sports scholarship.

From there, the men were flown to a further destination and driven in buses with blacked-out windows so the trainees could not determine the location.

Though the recruits never found out where they were being trained, multiple RRT officers said they believed their initial training, and successive courses, took place at Annapolis Naval Academy in Maryland. One former senior US official with direct knowledge of the programme told *Declassified* it was also likely that, at one point, trainees were taken to the CIA's training facility at Camp Peary,

near Williamsburg in Virginia, also known as 'The Farm'.

One former RRT officer recalled asking his CIA handler why they did not want the trainees to know their location in the US. "We have good intentions and do not act in bad faith. But the United States is not prepared to repeat its errors with Osama bin Laden," the CIA handler is said to have responded, referring to mistakes made in providing covert assistance to Afghan *mujahideen* in the 1980s.

On arrival at the facility, the men received training from CIA contractors, former special operations forces and SWAT team members of the US police, in tactical operations, close-quarter combat, weapons handling, reconnaissance, surveillance and intelligence gathering.

RRT commandos have been flown to Maryland, US, for SWAT-style training, under cover of sports scholarships

Following their first and second courses in 2004, titled "Renditions Operations Training" and "Disruption Operations", the commandos were formalised as the Rapid Response Team. But by then the new unit's nickname - the "Renditions Team" - had already stuck among the few who knew it existed.

RRT members are part of the special operations-oriented Recce Company of the Kenyan paramilitary police's General Service Unit (GSU). At their headquarters in Ruiru near Nairobi, they enjoy privileged status. Exclusive training facilities, such as 'Michelin House' - a mock terrorist hideout used for conducting entry drills - were financed by their US embassy liaison, multiple RRT officers said.

However, owing to the sensitivity of their operations, RRT officers were not permitted to reside in the same quarters as other teams in the GSU's Recce Company. This included other 'special teams', such as the US State Department and FBI-supported Crisis Response Team (CRT), which specialises in surveillance and hostage rescue, and which sometimes [supports](#) the RRT on tactical operations.

"Specialised units are needed to deal with extraordinary situations, such as hostage-taking and terrorist activity," former US ambassador Michael Ranneberger said.

He added, "We do that in a lot of countries, where we will identify a GSU [RRT]-like unit, a special unit [to work with]. Or if they don't exist, we sometimes help establish such units and then provide the training."

Target development

In the first few years after its founding, the RRT carried out relatively few offensive counter-terror operations. Although Kenya's intelligence service, the NIS, and Kenya's Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) "knew they had some bad people" in Kenya, as one former CIA official put it, political leaders were initially reluctant to be drawn into the US war on terror.

Former US ambassador William Bellamy agreed, noting, "When I was in Kenya we probably spent 70% of counter-terrorism [work] on good intelligence work with the Kenyans."

Explaining why the RRT was relatively dormant in its first few years, the former CIA counter-terrorism official said that targets were often operating below the radar.

“We try to stick, on certain levels, on many levels, within the law. I think that’s why you didn’t see much [action from RRT], because certain targets were either very deep cover and you weren’t able to make a case on them, and once you started getting a little more clarity on the cases and being able to take these suspects down for violations, that’s when you started seeing the Rapid Response Team get more active.”

The few counter-terror operations undertaken by the RRT in its first years were focused on the capture and subsequent rendition of terror suspects.

RRT officers would be summoned to Wilson Airport in Nairobi, briefed by CIA paramilitary liaison officers on their objectives, and then flown to their destination, which was often in Kenya but, on some occasions, included Somalia, former RRT officers and US officials confirmed.

The former senior CIA official recalled watching Kenyan clerics becoming radicalised by videos emerging from Iraq, particularly those of the then leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. “When the Zarqawi videos started popping up in Kenya, I was like ‘oh shit... here come the *takfiris*,” he said, referring to militant jihadists.

By 2006 Kenya’s NIS had developed intelligence liaison cells dedicated to working with the CIA, Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, also known as MI6) and Israel’s external spy agency, Mossad, multiple US and Kenyan intelligence sources told *Declassified*.

In later years, Mossad would assist in forming, training and providing weapons to a separate Recce squad ‘special team’, composed partly of former RRT and CRT officers, known as the Special Anti-Terror Team (SATT), a team dedicated to VIP protection and covert patrols of Kenya’s five-star hotels.

Alongside the CIA, MI6 helped Kenya’s NIS with target development, bringing together and analysing the various sources of intelligence to prioritise the greater threats.

The former CIA counter-terrorism official said the four pillars of the CIA and MI6 relationship with Kenyan intelligence were “training, mentorship, lead by example... and pressing”.

“When we talk about pressing a liaison partner, that is together [as the CIA and MI6]. We are working together with our liaison partner [NIS] to get things done. We’re meeting with SIS [MI6] and saying, ‘Hey here’s what we’re doing on this case’, you know, this is how we’re trying to push them, ‘we’re giving them this’ and they [MI6] would respond in kind.”

The former official added: “There were British-centred cases, there are US-centred cases, and I think on both sides, and in parallel, we’re all giving them training, equipment and money etc - I won’t talk about the amounts - to try and get it done, and then have oversight.”

One of the RRT’s major coups occurred in August 2009 when Kenyan and Western intelligence agencies detected a plot to stage simultaneous attacks on three hotels in Nairobi, one of which was to be [visited](#) by then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. A subsequent operation, driven by the CIA and NIS, pinpointed the location of suspects who were then captured by the RRT.

Out of gratitude to Kenyan intelligence, and “to bolster what we thought was already a pretty good relationship”, five months later then CIA chief Leon Panetta paid a secret visit to Kenya to meet with Michael Gichangi, then NIS director, a former US official familiar with the meeting recalled.

“Gichangi was absolutely a world-class spymaster. He did a great song and dance. A very polished guy, very glib. He gave a great presentation,” the former official said. With a successful meeting for

the visiting CIA director, the former official continued, "The outcome was, let's push ahead, let's try to deepen this, let's try to do more."

'Let's go get 'em'

Less than six months after this meeting, the US would come to heavily rely on its Kenyan intelligence partner, and the RRT commandos, amidst fall out from one of the worst terrorist attacks to hit the region in recent history.

On 11 July 2010, football fans had gathered to watch a World Cup match in Uganda when militants bombed a restaurant and rugby club, killing 74 people. Somali militant group Al-Shabaab publicly claimed responsibility, calling the attacks retaliation for Uganda's involvement in a UN-backed military mission to protect the Somali Transitional Federal Government.

In response to the attack, Kenyan intelligence and police snatched multiple suspects across the Horn of Africa. Press coverage of these operations tended to pinpoint Kenya's Anti-Terrorism Police Unit (ATPU) as being responsible. But while the ATPU was involved in some operations, those deemed high-risk or high-value were led by the RRT, at times with CRT support, officers from both teams confirmed.

A plot to kill Hillary Clinton was foiled by the CIA-backed Kenyan paramilitary team

Around 2010, al-Qaeda-inspired militants began targeting tourist sites in Kenya, killing civilians and abducting tourists, and the political barriers to taking action evaporated.

"I think that's when the Kenyans said 'this isn't just about America. We have to do something because they're hitting us too'," the former CIA counter-terrorism official said.

Former Kenyan vice president, Kalonzo Musyoka, said that at the time, "The position was taken by the NSC [Kenya's National Security Council] to exercise the right of 'active pursuit', because that [terrorism] was seen to harm our tourism industry," he added, having served on the Council as deputy president during 2008-2013.

As Kenya waged war against al-Shabaab outside its borders, domestically its covert war on terror suspects was also ramping up, the former CIA counter-terrorism official said. "Once they [Kenya] got on board [with the war on terror], the Recce [RRT] team gets busy... People that were long time targets; they get taken down."

He added: "Remember, you've been building this capacity since '02 and in some cases the first work started after '98. They [RRT] have got some of the best training in the world, some of the best tools, so they start getting active. In some cases they did, some of those targets were cross-border and some of them were inside Kenya."

The former official continued: "They [RRT] have got the discipline, they've got the techniques... and then you've got your US advisors [to the RRT], your British advisors [to NIS] and now it's like 'hey guys, let's go get 'em'. That's what you started seeing in terms of 'let's go get 'em'."

But when a target travels into Somalia, "that's his ass", the former official added, referring to the deadly US [programme](#) of drone strikes, backed by special force raids.

'Less constraint'

Kenya's burgeoning role in regional counter-terrorism in this period was shown most clearly by one target who was eventually captured by RRT operatives and is currently serving a jail sentence.

Brought up Catholic in western Kenya, Elgiva Bwire Oliacha converted to Islam in 2005, changing his name to Mohamed Seif. Though Bwire's journey into radicalisation is not extensively known, in 2009 he made his first attempt to join militants in Somalia, only to be thwarted by Kenyan police.

Reports claim that he eventually reached Somalia two years later, and received training from militants on how to use small arms and stage terrorist attacks. Two months after his return to Kenya, Bwire is said to have recruited others to conduct those attacks.

On 24 October 2011, after receiving intelligence that Bwire had led a grenade attack on a bus stop in Nairobi, killing six and injuring dozens more, RRT commandos descended on Kayole, one of Nairobi's densely populated neighbourhoods. They captured Bwire, along with a cache of grenades, assault rifles and over 700 rounds of ammunition.

But ATPU officers failed to claim the arrest, as was normal practice, an RRT officer familiar with the operation recounted, forcing personnel from the paramilitary unit to make a rare appearance in court and testify that they had [captured](#) Bwire.

Unused to appearing publicly, and fearing cross-examination, an RRT officer recalls anxiety at seeing someone from the unit having to make the court appearance. "Nobody knew [about] our existence, which was good [for] us", the officer said. However, even though RRT officers appeared in court, few questions were asked about the RRT itself.

There are US laws governing which foreign security services US government bodies can partner with. These include the [Leahy Law](#), which requires human rights vetting of units slated for assistance, training or equipment. But the law only applies to the US military, the State Department and law enforcement agencies, former Washington director at Human Rights Watch, Sarah Margon, said.

Robert Etinger, former deputy general counsel at the CIA, told *Declassified* in an email that the law does not apply to the intelligence community.

A former senior US official based in Africa, who had knowledge of Kenyan counter-terrorism operations, explained that programmes such as those supporting the RRT are run through the CIA, in part to avoid domestic legal restrictions.

"The Leahy amendment prevents the US from training anybody [we want] that's going to be useful to us in [offensive] anti-terrorism endeavours," said the former official. But "friends from across the aisle, the intelligence community, don't have similar restrictions".

Had the CIA been required to vet the Kenyan RRT under the terms of the Leahy Law, it may have faced difficult questions about the General Service Unit, the RRT's parent police unit from which its commandos are selected. One leaked US diplomatic [cable](#) from 2009 noted allegations that the GSU "is involved in committing serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings".

The classified RRT programme is run through the CIA in part to avoid legal restrictions, it is claimed

Former CIA deputy Crumpton disagreed that Leahy Law-related “bureaucratic reasoning” was why the CIA leads counter-terrorism operations in Kenya. Instead, he said, “this conflict, against al-Qaeda and ISIS [Islamic State] and affiliates, is fundamentally driven by intelligence”.

The CIA’s relationship with the RRT endures under Donald Trump’s presidency, US officials and RRT commandos confirmed.

A senior State Department official with knowledge of the CIA-RRT liaison explained: “The relationship goes back some way and we keep reinvesting in them because of that perception that we have, that they are somewhat more professional than the rest of the police.”

But under Trump, its operations are even less constrained than before, according to US officials. The CIA, and the paramilitary teams it supports, would encounter little criticism from the White House, a former senior CIA counter-terrorism official said.

“At the end of the day, Trump is not going to castigate them for violating human rights.”

He added: “You can brief Trump and tell him ‘the Kenyans just went and killed five targets unilaterally’ and Trump’s going to be like ‘and your point is? These are bad guys right?’

“So I think that if you’re the Agency [CIA], you’re going to keep working and hope the Kenyans keep trying to take down your targets in a way that is palatable.”

A former senior State Department official based in Africa agreed. “I would certainly think the Kenyans would feel under much less constraint, in terms of how they operate, than they ever did before under previous administrations.”

Grant Harris, a former special assistant to former president Barack Obama and senior director for African affairs between 2011-2015, told *Declassified*: “What we’re seeing now in the Trump administration is... less emphasis on governance, on human rights, on economic growth and development and a greater emphasis not just on security issues, but specifically counterterrorism and security tools.”

He added: “I’m very concerned this is militarising US-Africa policy, across the continent, in East Africa and elsewhere.”

-

Read **Part 1** of this investigation [here](#).

Read **Part 3** of this investigation [here](#).

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).