



9/11 and the United States-Kenya Relationship

By Ken Flottman



Looking at the sweep of twenty years, a generation, how have the 11 September 2001 al-Qaeda airplane crash attacks on New York and Washington impacted the relationship between the United States and Kenya?

To start to answer that question, we might create a counterfactual and imagine how things might have proceeded without the shock and horror of the (partial) success of al-Qaeda's terror attacks that day, especially the falling bodies and fiery collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. I think the basics of the relationship would likely have been quite similar.

Osama bin Laden's declared al-Qaeda war against the United States and its allies, including Kenya, was well along by 9-11 but it had not captured a lot of attention from the public in the United States and had little impact on American daily life and politics. For me, working in the defence industry as an attorney for a large aerospace company at their shipbuilding operation in Mississippi, terrorism had been brought home a year earlier when the damaged hull of the USS Cole, which had been bombed by al-Qaeda off Yemen, was brought to us for repair on the Gulf of Mexico on a giant heavy-lift ship. By coincidence, I was in Northern Virginia, at a seminar not far from the Pentagon on the infamous day of 9-11 itself. We were not so "on-line" in those days, and it was not until a break that we saw on a television set pulled into the hotel lobby that a plane had crashed into the Pentagon and

gradually became aware of what was happening.

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To understand what did and did not change in the American-Kenyan relationship, we probably need to go back further to [Jomo Kenyatta seeking American military assistance from the Ford Administration in the 1970s](#), through Minister Mwai Kibaki and others, when Kenya faced threats from Uganda's Idi Amin, and potential hostilities from Somalia's Siad Barre in the context of a possible disruption of Kenya's security relationship with Ethiopia following the overthrow of Haile Selassie by the Derg and Britain's unwillingness to show support.

By 1977, during the Jimmy Carter administration, [the US had started provided police training](#) in Kenya. The Norfolk Hotel was bombed by Palestinian terrorists in 1980, in apparent retaliation for Kenya's cooperation with the Israeli rescue operation at Entebbe in Idi Amin's Uganda in 1976.

Therefore, Kenya's recognition of its insecurity in a "rough neighbourhood", the related exposure to terrorists, and the desire to rely partly on and cooperate with the United States on security matters, was a component of the relationship for years before al-Qaeda co-founder Osama bin Laden moved from Afghanistan to Sudan in early 1991, from where he was reportedly funding jihadist militants and insurgents in many countries. America's [Operation Hope](#) which was providing famine relief in Somalia under President George H.W. Bush in December 1992, ended up with the US embroiled in clan warfare the following year as part of a UN peacekeeping mission, with al-Qaeda alleged to have contributed to the "Battle of Mogadishu" fiasco that influenced America's decision to withdraw in early 1994. In the meantime, the first attempt to blow up the World Trade Center had failed in 1993.

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Although Sudan evicted Osama bin Laden who established himself in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in 1996, al-Qaeda continued to operate in East Africa and a few months after bin Laden's February 1998 *fatwa* against Americans and their allies—presumably including Kenyans—came the embassy bombings in Nairobi and in Dar es Salaam.

Sceptical about American "nation building", George W. Bush took office in January 2001 on a platform of "compassionate conservatism" that was perhaps most positively expressed in expansive new aid programmes that shaped the US-Kenyan relationship. Of particular note is PEPFAR, the President's Emergency Plan For Aids Relief, enacted in 2003, and the President's Malaria Initiative that began in 2005, together with the Millennium Challenge Corporation. The US became extensively involved in Southern Sudan, with diplomatic and assistance efforts "back-officed" out of Nairobi.

While the 9/11 attacks led immediately to the invasion of Afghanistan and created the climate in which the long-simmering confrontation with Saddam Hussein became a "regime change" invasion in March 2003 two months before the passage of PEPFAR, the basics of the US-Kenya relationship of health and humanitarian assistance and security cooperation might not have been that much different had the attacks on the US not succeeded.

According to Congressional Research Service reports, Kenya has over the years typically received security assistance of some US\$40 million dollars annually as compared to about US\$800 million in

health, humanitarian, and economic assistance. Reporting has identified cooperation between Kenyan and US intelligence and paramilitary units in hunting terrorism suspects within Kenya itself but Kenya is not known to have participated in US efforts outside its borders.

A major instance of cooperation that might be imagined to have played out differently could be the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in late 2006 to displace the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and restore the Transitional Federal Government in Mogadishu. While US officials have stated they did not encourage this decision, we did ultimately provide air support and cooperated with Kenya to “seal the border” to fleeing terror suspects. Controversy arose about “renditions”. It might be that in the absence of the 9-11 attacks and the long and expansive “war footing” that followed, the US would have dissuaded the Ethiopian operation or followed a different policy to address al-Qaeda elements in Somalia with the rise of the UIC.

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As it is, the AMISOM force under the African Union was formed in early 2007 and radical elements from the UIC coalesced as al-Shaabab and announced an affiliation with al-Qaeda, eventually provoking the incursion by Kenya in the fall of 2011 following kidnappings in the Lamu area. Although the US is said to have explicitly discouraged this action by the Kenya Defence Forces, within several months Kenyan forces were allowed to join AMISOM and thus begin receiving Western-funded reimbursements.

Since 2011, Somalia has made significant gains in many respects but a shifting stalemate of sorts exists where al-Shabaab controls much territory outside major towns and sustains financing, while federal governance and security remain a work-in-progress.

Meanwhile, al-Shabaab elements continue to recruit and carry out insurgency and terror attacks in Kenya. The attack on Nairobi’s Westgate Mall that was splashed across Western media, the Mpeketoni attack, the horrific slaughter targeting Christian students at Garissa University, bus attacks and small bombings and the DusitD2 attack in Westlands, show a very wide range of actors, methods, and targets.

How much of this would really be different if al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon had been thwarted by intelligence beforehand, or by some other intervention, such as by the passengers of Flight 93 which was brought down in Pennsylvania before it could reach its intended target in Washington? The United States might well be different, and much that has happened in the world might be different. But, leaving aside the necessary impact of the ensuing Iraq war on the election of Barack Obama, and then Trump, the relationship between Kenya and the United States might well be much the same today.

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