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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

DATE: 10/16/2020

SL: More Than Black Hawk Down

The Takeaway:

- From backing an autocratic, genocidal government during the Cold War to paving the way for the expansion of Al-Shabaab, the United States has a long history of intervention in Somalia – with deadly results.
- Today, the United States is waging an oft-ignored shadow war in Somalia through special operations forces, private contractors, and, above all, a savage and secretive campaign of drone warfare.
- Donald Trump's recent claims of drawing down troop levels in Somalia are likely little more than a PR stunt, belying the administration's actual legacy of destruction not just in Somalia, but across Africa.

The United States' Bloody Legacy in Somalia

This Tuesday, news broke that Donald Trump is considering [drawing down](#) the number of U.S. troops stationed in Somalia. If you didn't hear about this until now, you're not alone; one consequence of the United States' entanglement in endless wars around the world is that some, like Somalia, tend to fly under the radar. This week, we try to change that, taking a deep dive into the decades of disastrous U.S. intervention in Somalia – its history, its status today, and how the United States could play a productive role toward peace... *if* it's willing to take a new approach.

Cold War Autocracy and Abandonment

In the 1980s, Somalia's Soviet-aligned government abruptly cut off relations with the USSR over the latter's support for Ethiopia in a territorial conflict. In typical Cold War fashion, the United States moved in to fill the vacuum, quickly becoming a key ally and military [benefactor](#) of the corrupt, repressive, dictatorial government of Siad Barre – even as Barre led a [genocide](#) of the Isaaq people in Somaliland during its war with Ethiopia. This would not last forever, however: as the Cold War drew to a close, the United States lost interest in the autocrat, and cut and ran rather than fostering peace and democracy in his place. Ultimately, civil war broke out – a bloody conflict that continues until today – the Barre government fell, and the country disintegrated into competing, warlord-controlled fiefdoms.

Mission Creep

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But as the civil war raged on and the scope of the humanitarian crisis became clear, the United States felt compelled to intervene once again – with a typically militarized band-aid solution. In 1992, the United States led a multinational UN-backed military effort to, ostensibly, protect humanitarian aid. Within a year, the mission had shifted to include forcibly pacifying and capturing warlords and their militias. The United States grew further [entangled](#) in the war, and local resentment of the military presence grew, culminating in the Battle of Mogadishu in which 18 U.S. troops and about 1,000 Somalis were killed (you can guess which losses the American blockbuster portrayal of the event focused on).

Post-9/11 Shadow Wars

While the United States' military withdrew following the incident, it didn't stop meddling for long. In the heightened aftermath of 9/11, the United States covertly entered into a new shadow war, [allying](#) with various warlords and militias, and providing military and economic support to Ethiopia in its invasion of the country in 2006. In a dynamic that has come to define the militaristic U.S. approach to counter-terrorism, this heavy-handed foreign intervention served primarily to foment further conflict and [increase](#) the allure of violent groups. By misunderstanding the local drivers to conflict in Somalia, as well as the embedded nature of armed actors within the Somali business and political classes, U.S. military intervention contributed to the rapid expansion of Al-Shabaab.

Today's Drone War

From the Bush and Obama era to today, the United States has remained heavily [involved](#) in [fueling](#) the violence and unrest in Somalia through a combination of small special operations forces, private contractors, and, especially, drone warfare. While it was not uncommon for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama to order U.S. airstrikes in Somalia, Donald Trump has bombed Somalia more in the first seven months of this year alone than under than the two previous administrations [combined](#). This increase in deadly strikes has seen a corresponding [increase](#) in civilian [deaths](#) – likely amounting to [war crimes](#). Exact numbers are hard to determine, however, because the administration has fought tooth and nail to keep records of strikes and civilian deaths [secret](#).

That is not to say that U.S. intervention is the only driver of violence. The central Somali government remains weak, unable to provide for its citizenry – including [opportunities](#) for the country's outsized youth population – and in conflict with state governments. Yet, U.S. military intervention remains a key exacerbator: by continuing to harm civilians in drone strikes with no accountability, the central government's perceived legitimacy amongst local communities is further shattered, driving support to outside the government.

Trump's "Withdrawal"

While a responsible drawdown of U.S. troops in Somalia would be welcome, Trump's reported plans can't be understood out of context: not only is his administration responsible for

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escalating a covert aerial war on Somalia for years, but almost all of the troops currently stationed in Somalia to be withdrawn were sent there [during](#) the Trump presidency. Even more, it seems [likely](#) that Trump's plans for "withdrawal" are more a rerouting of troops, accompanied by an increased reliance on private security contractors (Erik Prince's [dreams](#) come true). That's not an end to endless war or a road to sustainable peace in Somalia, that's a PR stunt.

AFRICOM's Forgotten Wars

Sadly, Somalia is hardly a unique case. Despite the Pentagon's claims that its African Command or AFRICOM has a "light footprint," recent documents [reveal](#) that the U.S. has at least 29 military [bases](#) in 15 countries across the continent. Some AFRICOM officials have even admitted that the U.S. has been "[at war](#)" in Africa for years (with what congressional authorization??).

Troop levels and military activity are, of course, hard to glean given the Pentagon's proclivity to opacity. One thing we do know: the DoD recently began [looking](#) for new authorities to carry out drone strikes in Kenya. (Meanwhile, many people forced to flee their homes by this warfare are unable to find refuge in the United States thanks to Trump's racist and xenophobic [Muslim and African Bans](#)).

A Path to Peace

There is an alternative to the post-9/11 status quo of covert warfare, privatized militaries, and secretive bombing campaigns in Somalia and beyond. First, the United States must end its shadow war on the country and provide reparations to those harmed — that alone won't put an end to Somalia's strife, but is a necessary step toward it. In its stead, the United States should support locally-led and justice-based peacebuilding efforts, empower those working for change on the ground, and engage in good faith, multilateral negotiations for peace. Achieving peace in a war-torn country like Somalia isn't easy. But decades of evidence have proven that more U.S. militarism won't help. It's time to end the United States' endless war in Africa and begin the long march down the path of peace.

Leaders in the Fight

For more resources on ending the U.S. war and building peace in Somalia and across Africa, check out the following organizations:

- [Africa Faith and Justice Network](#) (see their [Resist AFRICOM Action Kit](#))
- [Somali Peace Line](#)
- [We Are Women Activists](#)
- Black Alliance for Peace's "[U.S. Out of Africa Campaign](#)"
- [Raho-Somalia](#)
- [One Earth Future](#)
- [Elman Peace](#)
- [America Friends Service Committee](#)

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BURIED LEDES

Today marks the 18th anniversary of the passage of the 2002 AUMF — the legal authorization for the invasion of Iraq that has since been repeatedly and dubiously invoked to justify endless war. The 2002 AUMF must be [repealed](#), and it turns out, there's an [actual path](#) to doing so this year.

The hawkish “**Foundation for Defense of Democracies**” have been [implicated](#) in a digital harassment campaign against critics of the Trump administration. Color us shocked.

An explosive new report details **over \$1 billion flowing from Pentagon contractors and even the DoD itself to top DC think tanks** over five years — I guess that's what they mean by the marketplace of ideas.

If the pandemic has shown us anything, it's that the true threats to our security can't be solved unilaterally. **Over 100 House Democrats sent a letter to Trump urging global cooperation, not competition to fight the pandemic.**

What's better than one repressive right-wing authoritarian government? Two repressive right-wing authoritarian governments, making nice at the urging of a third. **Secretary Pompeo is urging Saudi Arabia to normalize ties with Israel.**

The Israeli government greenlit the construction of more than 3,000 (illegal) West Bank settlement buildings. Did we mention the Israeli government is repressive?

The Department of Homeland Security detained migrants in Guatemala and illegally moved them in unmarked vans to the Honduran border. While some of us worry that the U.S. will become an authoritarian nightmare, for others it already is.

At the peak of the AIDS crisis, one of the biggest obstacles to treatment was a **global patent regime that protected pharmaceutical profits at the expense of the lives of everyday people.** If the WTO doesn't [take action](#), that might also be the case for COVID-19.

A rare dose of good news: **Women Cross DMZ, the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, and MADRE have launched the Feminist Peace Initiative**, calling for a new U.S. foreign policy based on intersectional feminist principles of collective care, reparations, and accountability.

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And finally, a very [happy birthday](#) to progressive champion Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — from the young women inspired by her fight.