

Kampala Bombings Cause Somali Blackout

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Somalia has finally “surprised” and “shocked” the world – but predictability doesn’t make the obtuse international reaction any easier to digest. The bombings in Kampala are atrocious. Yet with inane reports like [“Who is al-Shabab”](#) and [“al-Shabab seeks to replace government.”](#) the setup is clearly on too.

The lights have been switched off.

[Reporting from the Western media](#) is dangerously blacked out, distorting Somalia’s instability to generate the appropriate reaction in their populaces. Africa’s media offers a more complete account, although it’s trending in the same direction. The possibility of military retaliation has quickly arisen as Western governments orchestrate the media machine to their best ability.

“The links between al Qaeda and al Shabaab are stronger” and training together, [according to some brilliant analysis](#) by David Shinn, former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia and “expert on al Shabaab.”

But using public relations to deflect reality ends in futile strategy. Rather than illuminating Somalia’s crisis, the Kampala bombings are being exploited to destroy incriminating evidence. Why single out al-Shabab and al-Qaeda when so many other factors are equally to blame? “Evil terrorists” only explains so much. All the blame is being pinned on them in the heat of the moment.

Thus less attention has fallen on the weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG), whose commendable attempt to survive merely funnels US arms to al-Shabab through Somalia’s black market. Corruption of millions in US and EU aid remains rampant. [Child soldiers wielding US arms](#) go unmentioned as do heavy-handed, unpopular African Union (AU) troops untrained in counterinsurgency and responsible for scores of civilian deaths. [African experts recently testified](#) to the US Congress that supporting the TFG without oversight does more harm than good.

Meanwhile Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, al-Qaeda’s former chief in Somalia, pops up sparingly and only to invoke the SEAL strike that killed him in September 2009. That al-Shabab and al-Qaeda [officially allied together](#) in February 2010 goes unsaid. It’s useless for people to realize that targeted assassinations have minimal effect.

And scant reporting has downplayed Uganda’s [new deployment of 2,000 emergency troops](#) to Mogadishu, as requested by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Uganda’s story runs deeper than being one of two contributors to the AU force (Burundi being the other), and the deployment sparked fears that Ethiopia, generally disliked in

Somalia, is on deck. Specific references that Somalia had reached a tipping point are similarly neglected; most reports opt for the standard copy-and-paste biography. Yet Blackhawk Down hasn't been referenced much either. None of Washington's sordid history in Somalia is.

All the back-story to Kampala has been edited out, leaving it the hollow shell of a "pointlessly brutal" al-Qaeda attack. A freeze frame of explosions and blood soaked American teenagers for Western consumption.

Kampala's tragedy isn't isolated, but orbits the larger tragedy in Somalia. Uganda deployed more troops without a strategy and al-Shabab retaliated. This war is ongoing and more troops beget more violence, as they've already started to do. One cannot expect Uganda or other African nations to deploy troops without consequence when blood has stained everyone's hands. Nor can one blame al-Qaeda for outmaneuvering America from Afghanistan into Somalia.

Unfortunately President Barack Obama automatically pledged "any support and assistance" to Uganda. Helping a US ally is one thing but FBI teams are just the beginning of a security rollout, thus Obama's decision will likely exacerbate the conflict. Lt. Col. Felix Kulaigye, army spokesman for Uganda, ominously told reporters, "Al-Shabab is the reason why we should stay in Somalia. We have to pacify Somalia."

That attitude has brought and will continue to bring chaos to Somalia.

Glints of truth can still be spotted amidst the smoke of Kampala. William Braniff, a US instructor at the Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, advises, "Regionalization of the conflict is a rational strategy for al Shabaab. They are stronger when there are foreign boots on the ground, and weaker otherwise." Where he is at a time like now?

Afyare Abdi Elmi, another al-Shabab expert, [predicts of the bombing](#), "It will invoke an interventionist mood in the region and within the international community. This might create an atmosphere where Somalia is a free for all and a number of troops are invited and come and go."

Many Somalis themselves, much as they dread al-Shabab, also fear that overreaction from the West or Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia – all US allies.

Unfortunately none of this seems to matter. The world's strategy up until Kampala and its subsequent reaction offers few reasons to expect a sound counter-response. In fact the main hope is that very overreaction. Washington officials closely monitoring the US and international media understand the threat of military retaliation is highly anticipated. But al-Shabab and al-Qaeda's actions suggest that its bombs possess dual motives: deterrence against additional forces and bait into the trap. They expect retaliation and will strike US allies if attacked by US forces; if not they continue about their war.

Either outcome serves their purpose.

The West can keep blaming al-Shabab and al-Qaeda, but that won't stabilize the conflict. Though the temptation may be to perceive AU or US troops as liberators, given that al-Shabab's popular support is low, they would likely throw dynamite on the fire. Going in is easy. Instead Somalia needs a full-spectrum exit strategy, and the countdown for a solution

is running out. The smart political play thus aligns with the best counterinsurgency: fusing international and regional diplomacy into a tone-down reaction that doesn't further inflame the region.

What's needed to avert a military catastrophe is a grand political strategy – an international Task Force for Somalia. The failed state rivals Iraq or Afghanistan and yet receives a fraction of the time and resources. Not only does a Task Force appear to be the most realistic solution to the conflict (despite its apparent idealism), nearly every actor is calling for international intervention.

Last week President Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, armed with an AK-47, spearheaded the front lines to rally the nation. [He told Reuters](#) after returning to Mogadishu, "Things have gone beyond a level we can tolerate so there is an urgent need for international or regional help. My government can do little to forge its institutional duties because of constant attacks."

The same demand came from Sunni militia Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a, formerly allied with the government and now dangerously isolated [after falling out with the TFG](#). Upon denouncing the TFG group spokesman Abu Yusuf Al-Qadi added, "We are requesting from the international community to know and see that the government had violated the deal signed." He wants international assistance too.

And Kenya's Foreign Minister, Moses M. Wetangula, warned days before the Kampala bombings, "The levels of engagement of the United States, the levels of commitment, have been below our expectations. America, remember, enjoys the status currently of the only superpower, expected to have the capacity to do some of the things countries with limited capacity like ourselves cannot do, including enforcing Security Council resolutions."

Now add in General David Petraeus's [Special Forces directive](#) that expanded operations in Somalia, plus the SEAL raid on Nabhan, an event which solidified al-Qaeda and al-Shabab's alliance. It becomes clear that the West's response to Somalia has remained military-centric despite a change in rhetoric. Reversing this mindset is critical to the mission.

Wetangula illuminates what a potential Task Force may look like: several US officials to act in the UN, EU officials to oversee regional initiatives, a heavy African unit comprised of high-level officials from all of Somalia's neighbors, and representation from Somaliland and Puntland to exercise regional authority with TFG. Egyptian and Saudi Arabian officials may also be enlisted for the purpose of Islamic reintegration programs. A dozen or so members could form the team, America operating from the back and Africans up front.

Restoring the TFG to working order would be the first task, either by reforming it or disbanding and replacing it with a more solid structure. This would necessitate a deep level of participation from Somalia's local power-brokers, who must be recruited to play an active role in the Task Force. A bottom-up strategy will never succeed without assistance from the top, making it essential to promote diplomats who sincerely understand they serve the Somali people.

Among many secondary issues to address are investigations into the TFG's use – and America's arming – of child soldiers and the harassing of journalists who reported on the story. At the top of the list: a regional construct for Somalia, Somaliland, and Puntland, a peace treaty with Ethiopia, piracy (which will never be solved at sea), and proxy negotiations with militant groups. None of this will be easy, cheap, or quick.

The Task Force's ultimate objective, as politics alone won't resolve the conflict, is devising an all-encompassing framework to run potential AU/EU/US military operations through, or a more robust UN peacekeeping mission. This isn't advocacy of those operations, only the acceptance of their inevitability. The Task Force must minimize the need for military action and alleviate negative reaction through the proper political and cultural knowledge. And it must act before al-Qaeda strikes a Western target from Somalia, before Ethiopian or US brigades are forced to storm Mogadishu and other al-Shabab positions.

Before the war is lost for good.

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