

Nairobi Westgate Mall Attack: Canada's Contribution to Violence in Africa

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Region: [Canada](#), [sub-Saharan Africa](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

There are no shades of grey, no nuance or even cause and effect in the simplistic world view proclaimed by the current Canadian government.

The Conservatives' response to the horrific attack in Nairobi's Westgate Mall has been to thump their chests and proclaim their anti-terror bona fides.

"[The fight against](#) international terrorism is the great struggle of our generation, and we need to continue with the resolve to fight this," bellowed Foreign Minister John Baird. For his part, Stephen Harper boasted that "[our government](#) is the government that listed al-Shabab as a terrorist entity."

But the prime minister has ignored the fact that his government also played a small role in the growth and radicalization of the organization responsible for this terrible crime in Kenya. After the failed US invasion of Somalia in the early 1990s (Black Hawk Down) American forces once again attacked that country in December 2006.

After the Islamic Courts Union won control of Mogadishu and the south of the country from an assortment of warlords, American forces launched air attacks and 50,000 Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia. According to a cable released by Wikileaks, the US under secretary of state for Africa, Jendayi Frazer, [pressed Ethiopia's Prime Minister](#) Meles Zenawi to intervene.

Ottawa supported this aggression in which as many as [20,000 Somalis were](#) killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. Throughout 2007 and 2008 when the US launched periodic airstrikes and Ethiopian troops occupied Somalia, Ottawa added its military presence.

At various points during 2008, HMCS Calgary, HMCS Iroquois, HMCS Charlottetown, HMCS Protecteur, HMCS Toronto and HMCS Ville de Québec all [patrolled off the coast](#) of Somalia. In the summer of 2008 Canada [took command of NATO's](#) Task Force 150 that worked off the coast of Somalia.

The Conservatives' public comments on Somalia broadly supported Ethiopian/US actions. They made no criticism of the US bombings and when prominent Somali-Canadian journalist Ali Iman Sharmarke was assassinated in Mogadishu in August 2007 then foreign minister Peter Mackay only condemned "the violence" in the country. He never mentioned that the assassins were pro-government militia members with ties to Ethiopian troops.

The Conservatives backed a February 2007 UN Security Council resolution that called for an international force in Somalia. They also endorsed the Ethiopia-installed Somali government,

which had operated in exile. A February 2007 Foreign Affairs release noted: "[We welcome Somali](#) President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed's announcement to urgently convene a national reconciliation congress involving all stakeholders, including political, clan and religious leaders, and representatives of civil society." In April 2009 the Somali transitional government's minister of diaspora affairs and ambassador to Kenya were feted in Ottawa.

Supported by outsiders, the transitional government had little backing among Somalis. An [Oxfam report](#) explained: "The TFG [transitional federal government] is not accepted as legitimate by much of the population. Unelected and widely perceived as externally imposed through a process that sidelined sub-national authorities and wider civil society, the transitional federal institutions face strong allegations of corruption and aid diversion."

In maybe the strongest signal of Canadian support for the outside intervention, Ottawa did not make its aid to Ethiopia contingent on its withdrawal from Somalia. Instead they increased assistance to this strategic ally that borders Sudan and Somalia. Among CIDA's largest recipients, Ethiopia received about [\\$150 million](#) annually in Canadian aid from 2008 to 2011.

Aid to Ethiopia was controversial and not only because that country invaded and occupied its neighbour. An October 2010 Globe and Mail headline noted: "[Ethiopia using Canadian aid](#) as a political weapon, rights group says."

In early 2009 Ethiopian troops withdrew from Somalia (they reinvaded in late 2011 and some 8,000 Ethiopian troops continue to occupy parts of the country). The Conservatives helped the multi-country African Union force that replaced the Ethiopian troops. "[Canada is an active](#) observer in the (African Union) and provides both direct and indirect support to the [Somalia] mission," explained a heavily censored June 2012 government briefing obtained by The Canadian Press under the Access to Information Act.

In 2011 Ottawa contributed [\\$5.8 million](#) US towards logistical support for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) while in February 2012 Canada announced a \$10 million contribution for the deployment of a Ugandan Formed Police Unit to Somalia. "[Indirectly, Canada is engaged](#) in training initiatives through (Directorate of Military Training and Co-operation) to enable (African Union) troop contributing nations through the provision of staff and peace support operations," noted the above-mentioned internal briefing.

The US paid, trained and armed most of AMISOM. In July 2012 the Los Angeles Times reported: "[The U.S. has been quietly](#) equipping and training thousands of African soldiers to wage a widening proxy war against the Shabaab. ... Officially, the troops are under the auspices of the African Union. But in truth ... the 15,000-strong force pulled from five African countries is largely a creation of the State Department and Pentagon, trained and supplied by the U.S. government and guided by dozens of retired foreign military personnel hired through private contractors."

In October 2011 thousands of Kenyan troops invaded Somalia and they remain in the country under AMISOM. "[Kenya, in many ways](#), was simply carrying out the West's bidding," noted a recent Globe and Mail editorial.

Al Shabab claims its killing of shoppers and mall workers in Nairobi was a response to Kenya's military invasion of Somalia. Since the Ethiopia/US invasion in late 2006 the group has waged a violent campaign against the foreign forces in the country and Somalia's

transitional government. During this period al Shabab has grown from being the relatively small youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union to the leading oppositional force in the country. It has also radicalized. Rob Wise, a researcher at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, notes that Ethiopia's occupation of Somalia transformed al Shabab into, "[the most powerful](#) and radical armed faction in the country."

Al Shabab has turned from being a national organization towards increasing ties to Al Qaeda. In July 2010 the group pulled off its first major international attack when it killed 74 in Kampala in response to Uganda's occupation of Somalia.

Canada's support for foreign intervention in Somalia has not gone unnoticed. When a group calling themselves Mujahedin of Somalia abducted a Canadian and Australian in October 2008 they accused Canada and Australia of "[taking part in the destruction](#) of Somalia." They demanded a change in policy from these two countries. Similarly, in October 2011 an al Shabaab official cited [Canada as one of a handful](#) of countries that deserved to be attacked.

Portrayed by Washington and Ottawa as simply a struggle against Islamic terrorism, the intervention in Somalia was driven by geopolitical and economic considerations. A significant amount of the world's goods, notably oil from the Persian Gulf, pass along the country's 1,000-mile coastline and whoever controls this territory is well placed to exert influence over this shipping.

There are also oil deposits in the country. A February 2012 Observer headline noted: "[Why defeat of Al Shabaab](#) could mean an oil bonanza for western firms in Somalia." With plans to invest more than \$50 million, Vancouver-based Africa Oil began drilling an exploratory well in northern Somalia's semi-autonomous Puntland region at the start of 2012. This was the first significant oil drilling in Somalia in two decades. The Canadian company didn't escape the eye of Al Shabaab. A Twitter post from the group's press office called Africa Oil's contracts "non-binding". "[Western companies must](#) be fully aware that all exploration rights and drilling contracts in N. Eastern Somalia are now permanently nullified", the group's spokesperson wrote. In an interview with Maclean's Africa Oil CEO Keith Hill acknowledged the "[significant](#)" security risks and costs for their operations in Somalia but he noted the rarity of a "billion-barrel oil field."

The 2006 US/Ethiopia invasion of Somalia has spiraled into ever more foreign intervention/local radicalization, which has caused a great deal of human suffering. This destructive cycle needs to be broken.

If the Conservatives have any concern for the people of Somalia — and neighbouring countries — they'd stop their anti-terror chest thumping and end their contributions to this violent cycle.

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