

Somalia: US Backs Puppet Government's Planned Military Offensive

By [Brian Smith](#)

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The United States' military is working closely with its Somali counterparts in planning a major offensive against Islamist militias who control the bulk of the country, including almost all of the capital, Mogadishu.

The New York Times reports that Washington is using drone surveillance planes over Somalia and is providing surveillance information on insurgent positions to the military commanders of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The Obama administration has also supervised the training of Somali forces and provided covert training to Somali intelligence officers. Such training, which has also been undertaken by Washington's European Union allies, has taken place in US client states—Djibouti, Ethiopia, Uganda and in Kenya and Sudan. It has been condemned by Amnesty International, since it is not subject to "adequate vetting and oversight procedures", and "some of the training is planned without proper notification to the UN Sanctions Committee, therefore undermining the UN arms embargo on Somalia".

Following the lessons learnt in Somalia in 1993, the US military has been wary of committing its own troops into areas considered unstable or hostile. It has relied instead on local forces, while guiding events from a safe distance.

"This is not an American offensive," US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Johnnie Carson claimed. "The US military is not on the ground in Somalia. Full stop." He added, "There are limits to outside engagement, and there has to be an enormous amount of local buy-in for this work."

However, the Times cites an unnamed Washington official, who predicted that US covert forces would get involved if the offensive that could begin in a few weeks dislodged Al-Qaeda terrorists. "What you're likely to see is airstrikes and Special Ops moving in, hitting and getting out," the official said.

The US press has clearly been thoroughly briefed about the offensive. The Washington Post explained how the US administration's tactics have changed under President Barack Obama, as the US has escalated its attacks against perceived Al Qaeda suspects and their allies.

The Post sets out the three options that the US military considers with regard to "terrorist" suspects. Firstly, an airstrike on the suspect's home or vehicle; secondly, an attempt to take him alive; or, thirdly, an attack from helicopters that land at the scene to confirm the kill. The latter was the option the White House authorized last September, when helicopters launched from a US ship off the Somali coast blew up a car carrying Saleh Ali Nabhan, who

was nominally the head of Al Qaeda in East Africa.

The Post believes that the decision to kill Nabhan was one of a number of similar operations the Obama administration has conducted globally over the past year, resulting in dozens of targeted killings and no reports of high-value detentions. Such attacks are authorized even more frequently under Obama than under the Bush administration.

The US government is directly responsible for the chaos and insecurity that pervade Somalia, after decades of US support for warlords and illegitimate governments. Somalia and Yemen—a country on the Arabian Peninsula directly across the Gulf of Aden from Somalia—are seen by the US as key areas in its efforts to control the strategic Horn of Africa as it confronts its rivals, such as China, and makes preparations for a possible war with Iran.

In preparation for the imminent offensive, the TFG has gathered its forces in Mogadishu and massed new and refurbished military trucks, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, ambulances and dozens of “technicals”—pickup trucks with cannons riveted on the back.

Militants from the opposing al Shabaab militia, backed by a faction of Hizbul Islam, have also poured into the capital and its outskirts to reinforce the numerous organised groups already there.

This influx of forces has deepened the humanitarian crisis, leading to a mass exodus of civilians from Mogadishu. Thousands of residents have fled to cramped makeshift camps on the outskirts of the city, where little aid is reaching them. In the past month, some 100,000 others have been displaced across the country, according to the UN High Commission for Refugees. Amnesty International estimates that some 1.5 million people have been displaced by fighting in Somalia since 2007.

In a pattern that reflects its past practice in Somalia and Afghanistan, the US is setting tribal, religious and ethnic factions against one another. This can only lead to further conflict and produce a ruling clique that reflects the interests of a small group that rules by suppressing all opposition.

The TFG recently struck a political deal with Somalia’s main Sufi Islamist group, Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah. This arose in late 2008, as the withdrawal of US-backed Ethiopian troops from Somalia led the Ethiopian government to seek a means of containing the Islamist threat on its border.

The strategy is to use Ahlus Sunnah militia to push towards Mogadishu from the central region, as part of a three-pronged offensive. The other two prongs are a militia made up of Somali refugees living in Kenya advancing from the Kenyan side, and TFG and African Union troops (AMISOM) attempting to retake the capital. AMISOM has about 5,000 Ugandan and Burundian troops in Somalia, with another 1,700 on the way. The offensive will be backed up by US drones, airstrikes and special forces operations.

The other weapon that the US has at its disposal in Somalia is humanitarian aid. Mark Bowden, the United Nations humanitarian coordinator for Somalia, believes that the West, in particular Washington, is using the issue of humanitarian aid as a political tool: “Our concern is that what we’re seeing is a politicisation of humanitarian issues,” he explained. This follows the halving of aid by the US and British governments, the largest donors of food assistance to Somalia, despite the growing humanitarian crisis.

Aid has been cut in order to stop it reaching areas controlled by the insurgents, primarily al Shabaab. The Times article appears to bear out this claim, with reports that Washington is using its influence to encourage private aid agencies to move quickly into “newly liberated areas,” in an effort to make the TFG more popular. Food is being prevented from reaching civilians in areas held by the insurgents and only provided in return for support for the TFG.

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