

African Unity (AU) and the Militarization of the African Continent

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It's hard to pinpoint what just happened at the African Union summit in Kampala, Uganda. More troops [are on their way to Somalia](#) – 4,000 in total from Uganda, Guinea, and Djibouti with potentially 1,300 from Burundi – which would bring the total AU force to roughly 11,000. As to what they can do, here the waters begin to muddy.

The official line is that Washington, working through the United Nations' command of African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), rejected an AU call to expand its mandate from peace-keeping to "peace-making." Johnnie Carson, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, informed reporters that Augustine Mahiga, the UN special representative for Somalia, rejected the doctrine of allowing UN peacekeeping troops to attack al-Shabab.

Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), desperate at it is, has welcomed the incoming assistance, but houses public reservations of unintentionally buoying al-Shabab. Vetoing the AU indicates that America and the UN harbor similar doubts.

But reading between the lines purifies the waters in the near future – and a deadly long-term outlook begins to emerge. Carson said that Washington believes the current AU mandate allows for soldiers to "defend themselves" and protect TFG installations like the presidential palace and military bases. Carson insists, "It was Ambassador Mahiga's view that the mandate that currently exists is sufficiently broad enough to provide the AMISOM forces with the capacity to do the job that is required."

Meaning the mandate already approves of offensive capabilities, as revealed by [escalating battles in Mogadishu](#) following the Kampala bombings.

Not only are offensive missions pushing into al-Shabab territory, Uganda's personal trigger to retaliate has surely quickened after Kampala. And a new mandate will become increasingly necessary as the fighting intensifies, one that may authorize total warfare and is already being drafted. Yves Sorokobi, spokesman for the UN secretary-general, told Al Jazeera that the current mandate is "sufficiently strong," but also hinted at a wider conflict to come.

"After the summit in Kampala, the AU will make a certain number of recommendations on how the mandate can be strengthened and on that basis there will be – here at the Security Council – a review of what's doable [and] what's not doable. This will depend on the analysis that the AU will deliver to us. If on that basis we believe that there's reasonable ground to fear that the situation might get out of hand, and that the peacekeeping force needs to be given preemptive military options, I am pretty confident that the Security Council will support that idea."

Given that the UN rejected an expanded mandate under US direction, a future green-light will similarly come from Washington.

Somalia generally appears as one of two objects: a war to intervene in or a war to flee from. Many oppose military escalation to what is considered an intractable conflict, believing that the war will further destabilize and either require unfeasible resources or infect all of East Africa. The only practical hope is an international system to oversee the vast network of military and, more importantly, non-military operations necessary in Somalia.

From afar the AU's summit, in concert with the UN and America, may appear organized. This is normal because it's the image Washington seeks to create. [Carson has exhausted himself](#) in distancing US policy from the AU's actions, repeating the legitimacy of an international response to nearly every African media outlet. But while he's chosen the right words, US actions bear the opposite pattern. No sooner had a failed US-supported Ethiopian invasion ended did the West begin funneling more weapons directly into the TFG.

Sound strategy in a way, as the West cannot afford for Somalia to become al-Qaeda's lawless hideout.

Yet as the TFG grew weaker and weaker (and US arms flowed to al-Shabab through the black market), America found itself needing a way to insert ground troops without US flags on their shoulders. The AU is the only realistic option and Kampala has been predictably exploited by a fierce US push for more troops. Washington then used the AU to portray internationalism, a crucial element of counterinsurgency, but internationalism alone doesn't produce viable COIN. Military is still a main ingredient and the battle itself has become overshadowed by US-AU cooperation.

An international flavor is concealing what remains essentially conventional warfare, offering an smooth road towards disaster.

Holes in Somalia's counterinsurgency are found at the most basic levels. Proper "clear, hold, and build" COIN is troop and time intensive, yet the AU has still failed to deploy a decisive force. Expanding from 6,000 to 11,000 increases the force ratio by almost 100%, but 6,000 troops were so meager that they skew this advantage. Not including Somaliland and Puntland, Somalia houses roughly three million people within 125,000 square miles. Two times the AU troops increases the ratio of troops to civilians from 1/500 to 1/275, far below the preferred ratios of 1/10 or 1/20. The space one troop occupies improves from 20 to 10 square miles, still not close to one per square mile.

Meanwhile the ratio between AU and al-Shabab troops boosts from 1/1 to 2/1, a relatively insignificant margin in counterinsurgency. NATO and Afghan soldiers hold an 8/1 ratio against the Taliban, spurning great wonder as to how they're gaining in strength, let alone surviving. Such is the unconventional nature of guerrilla warfare.

11,000 or 20,000 AU troops will almost certainly prove indecisive, resulting in further military stalemate and suffering for average Somalis. Time is another factor seemingly disregarded; Somalia needs multiple decades of constant lifting. And al-Shabab's own force may increase if Somalia becomes a premier jihad. Were one to even begin reaching a realistic force level for Somalia, 40,000 brings the troop-to-civilian ratio down to 1/75 and produces an 8/1 ratio against al-Shabab. This force would be divided among Mogadishu and

al-Shabab's strongholds in Kismayo and Beledweyne, with the rest dispersed throughout the countryside to harass al-Shabab's counteroffensive. And they would need to stay beyond five or 10 years.

Though this many troops may create the very backlash against their deployment, it's still possible for the AU to expand beyond 20,000. But the only way this will happen - other than a large-scale terrorist attack - is if Somalia begins to demonstrate indisputable signs of progress, and the chances appear low.

As of this moment only trace elements of counterinsurgency can be found in the AU/US strategy. Already surging more troops to prop up a weak and unpopular government, the very idea of reacting on the offensive indicates a conventional response shrouded in an international COIN wrapper. Carson was recently asked pointblank, "The option being pursued in Somalia now is a military one. Why don't you encourage Muslim religious leaders in the region to pursue another course of action?"

His response: "With respect to Somalia, I would characterize the efforts there in very different ways; it is not a military solution under way but AMISOM's efforts to stabilize the situation in favor of a political process that was agreed to in Djibouti, an agreement which is under assault by the al-Shabaab, the Hizbul Islam and other violent extremist groups."

This is exactly the problem - using internationalism to vouch for a weak government and create the false impression of counterinsurgency.

Meanwhile Carson has become a shield for Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. Himself fending off a 2005 article in which he [insinuated Museveni is a dictator](#), Obama's reformed position is also attracting scrutiny. Andrew M. Mwenda writes in The Independent, "when he came to power, US President Barack Obama showed a cold attitude to Museveni; quietly despising him for clinging to power and presiding over a corrupt system. Now, with Ugandans paying with blood for American geo-strategic interests in this region, Museveni is indispensable to Obama's plans for this region."

More definitively, Carson has become a denial spokesman for the AU [when it comes to civilian casualties](#), showing total disregard for counterinsurgency. He's argued numerous times since Kampala, "I think that some of the tactics employed by al-Shabab are responsible for some of the civilian casualties that have been reported in the press. Al-Shabab moves in and out of market areas, in and out of civilian residential areas..."

Though governments instinctively place the blame on insurgents for operating in civilian environments, counterinsurgency proves the opposite on the ground. US officials in Afghanistan admit the onus is on coalition troops to prevent civilian casualties even when baited by Taliban forces, yet discount the same theory in Somalia. Carson and AU officials are bent on denying indiscriminate shelling, but they never actually deny the casualties. Only the blame. This may play in America and Uganda, but Somalis feel somewhat different when an AU shell lands on their house and no one from the TFG ever arrives.

Foreign governments simply don't want to fight the war being presented, but they cannot bend Somalia's counterinsurgency into conventional warfare.

The West and the AU occupy an admittedly tough situation: how to balance the need to respond with the need to de-escalate. The regional and international community justifiably

fears that no response will embolden al-Shabab, to the point where the TFG may prematurely collapse. But this fear of non-action has translated into strict offense and retaliation, mentally anchoring the West and Africa to conventional warfare when counterinsurgencies are better waged by not firing.

Thomas Hammes, a career US Marine, recounts in *The Sling and the Stone* that Marines made great beat cops in Mogadishu during 1992, canvassing the city and getting to know the people. Offensive actions were limited and the city returned to a semblance of normalcy. The UN then did what many military analysts warned against when it took over control of the city – it withdrew into bases and rely on superior firepower. UN forces lost control of authority in and information from the streets, leading to inevitable retreat.

Currently, there's no talk of using additional troops to saturate Mogadishu so that the AU may intimately connect with Somalis and begin real counterinsurgency. All that's heard are war-cries to attack al-Shabab.

While the positive effects of Washington and the AU's expanding policy have yet to be seen, the negative consequences are already beginning to manifest. Civilian casualty reports in the media have tainted and thus limited AU troops during the entire process. And while many analysts predict that al-Shabab would fragment if left to its own devices, a conclusion far from certain, more accepted is that foreign forces unite Somalia's various militias. Rather than stem the insurgency virus, it [quickly internalized in Puntland](#).

"Sheikh Mohamed Saïd Atom has been recruiting Islamists in those hilly areas since 2005," said resident Hussein Ali of the now famous al-Shabab spinoff. "He has indoctrinated the youth using three means: a huge amount of money from the sales of weapons, sharia law and convincing his clan they have little political influence on Puntland's administration."

Now Atom, who believes "we are part and parcel of al Shabaab," has decided to throw his full weight into the war. Both al-Shabab and Atom would later [deny working together](#) as insurgents sometimes do, one more sign of collaboration.

Elsewhere Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, chief of Hizbul Islam, has apparently switched back to al-Shabab's side. Aweys, who has feuded with al-Shabab since 2009, entered negotiations with the TFG last month after half of Hizbul-Islam reverted to al-Shabab. Lately he's been renegotiating with al-Shabab too, [announcing the other day](#) that "their discussions were continuing in good form." Aweys [subsequently attacked government forces](#) near the presidential palace.

Conversely the Sunni militia Ahlu Sunna, once allied with the government and al-Shabab's only non-state enemy, has been a non-factor in recent weeks. Having split from the government in June and demanded international mediation, it has given no indication of repairing the damage.

Without an immediate emphasis on counterinsurgency and non-military operations, al-Shabab spokesman Sheik Ali Mohamud Rage may not be far off [when he predicts](#), "We are telling the African populations not to get duped by the mirage peddled by your leaders. Let your sons not be annihilated in Mogadishu. Those who are pushing your leaders such as the U.S. and Europe and the like are in agony in areas they invaded. All they want is for you to share with their people the loss, mourning and cries."

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