Inside the Secretive US Air Campaign In Somalia

Since Trump took office, figuring out whom the US is killing and why has become nearly impossible.

By Amanda Sperber

FEBRUARY 7, 2019
Halimo Mohamed Abdi said the blast broke both her hips, left shrapnel embedded in her thigh, and caused terrible burns that cost her both breasts. Before she lost consciousness, she told me, she saw three boys—ages 9, 10, and 16—die in the explosion, which occurred at night in a field outside Bariire, a village 30 miles west of the Somali capital of Mogadishu. She also said the strike came from the sky and that afterward she had to be hospitalized for three months.

When Abdi was finally able to leave the ward, she found her house in ruins and 25 of her goats dead. Now she lives in Salama camp, one of the 996 squalid settlements lining the 20-mile road that runs from Afgooye to Mogadishu. The camps are filled with tens of thousands of Somalis who have fled American air strikes and the fighting between government militias and Al Shabab, the extremist group linked to Al Qaeda.

Abdi, like many Somali herders, doesn’t follow the Western calendar, so she’s unsure of the exact date of the strike. But she says it was about two weeks before Eid al-Fitr, which began on the evening of June 14 last year.
IN THE VALLEY OF DEATH: SOMALILAND’S FORGOTTEN GENOCIDE

Ismail Einashe and Matt Kennard

The United States Africa Command is the only military actor that acknowledges conducting air and drone strikes in this region of Somalia, known as Lower and Middle Shabelle. Located just a few hours outside Mogadishu, both areas are Al Shabab strongholds. On June 1, AFRICOM issued a press release stating that, on May 31, a strike had been conducted 30 miles southwest of Mogadishu, killing 12 “terrorists.” But the AFRICOM statement only raised more questions: Did the American command count the three boys killed as terrorists? Why was Abdi’s farm targeted? Was this even the attack she described?

Such questions have become increasingly common with the escalation of US air operations in Somalia. Since Donald Trump took office, the US military has approximately tripled the number of strikes that it conducts each year in Somalia, according to figures confirmed by the Pentagon, while such actions—and the reasons behind them—have become increasingly opaque.

“It’s hard to know what standards and processes the Trump administration, since taking office in 2017, has been applying to counterterrorism operations in places like Somalia, given the
administration’s retrenchment on transparency with respect to the overall policy framework governing counterterrorism strikes,” said Joshua Geltzer, the senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council from 2015 to 2017.

In March of last year, 13 NGOs, including the American Civil Liberties Union and the Human Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School, released a statement criticizing the lack of information on the use of armed drones and other lethal force by the Trump administration: “We are deeply concerned that the reported new policy, combined with this administration’s reported dramatic increase in lethal operations in Yemen and Somalia, will lead to an increase in unlawful killings and in civilian casualties.”
Representative Adam Smith (D-WA), the new chair of the House Armed Services Committee, said that the Trump administration hasn’t even shared this information with Congress. The administration, he said, has failed to deliver a report on its military actions in Somalia that was mandated by the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. “We don’t know what the strategy is,” Smith said, “because we required the administration to lay out its long-term strategy... but they have not yet done so, as required by law.”

The White House did not respond to requests for comment.

Over October and November of 2018, I spent five weeks in Somalia investigating the impact of the US air campaign. My goal was to find out whether there were strikes happening that were not being made public and civilian casualties that were not being disclosed. I interviewed 25 Somalis from Lower and Middle Shabelle who had been displaced by the strikes and were now living in camps near Mogadishu. Others who provided me with information or insights included current and former senior Somali security and intelligence officials; current and former senior American security and diplomatic officials and contractors; members of the country’s Federal Parliament; and about a dozen well-connected Somali and American analysts, activists, and aid workers.

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My investigation identified strikes that went unreported until they were raised with AFRICOM, but also others that AFRICOM could not confirm—which suggests that another US agency may also be launching air attacks in the region. The investigation also tracked down evidence that AFRICOM’s claim of zero civilian casualties is almost certainly incorrect. And it found that the United States lacks a clear definition of “terrorist,” with neither AFRICOM, the Pentagon, nor the National Security Council willing to clarify the policies that underpin these strikes.
The relationship between the United States’ and Somalia’s security apparatuses evolved with the new presidents who took office in both countries in early 2017. In March of that year, *The New York Times* reported that President Trump had signed a directive that designated parts of Somalia as areas of “active hostilities” for at least 180 days. This designation granted AFRICOM greater flexibility to launch strikes in those regions. During most of President Obama’s time in office, suspected members of Al Shabab could only be targeted if they were judged to be threats to the United States. The new directive allowed AFRICOM to kill anyone deemed to be a member of Al Shabab, and it also required less coordination between military and intelligence agencies before a strike could take place.

Nearly two years later, the United States Africa Command will not say whether the declaration of “active hostilities” is still in place or what parts of Somalia it applies to. Nor would AFRICOM comment on which agencies were helping to vet the targets or had done so in the past, instead referring me to a spokesperson at the Department of Defense. That person told me that a member of the National Security Council was better placed to answer my questions. The NSC said they would look into my queries but did not respond in time for publication.

Changes were afoot in Somalia as well. The rules of engagement between the two countries have always been informal, according to Abdillahi Mohamed Sanbaloooshe, the director of Somalia’s National Intelligence and Security Agency in 2014 and again from April 2017 through February 2018. Sanbaloooshe told me that little was written down, less was signed, and nothing was concrete. There was “no military agreement; there is only gentleman’s agreement,” he recalled of the operational arrangements regarding intelligence and security.

But the cooperation went from informal to optional when, a month after Trump’s inauguration, Somalia elected Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, a dual US-Somali national better known as Farmajo, as president. A senior adviser to Somalia’s previous and current presidents, who spoke on condition of anonymity to protect his safety, told me that Farmajo gave the Pentagon a “blank check” when it came
to deciding where and when to strike. (AFRICOM maintains that strikes are coordinated with the Somali government.)

Despite all the comments, analyses, and educated guesses that I was offered, the only certain facts are these: Since the inaugurations of Trump and Mohamed, drone attacks and bombings have spiked.

The Pentagon reported 45 “precision strikes” in Somalia in 2018, up from 35 in 2017 and 14 in 2016. But this may not represent the full extent of the US air campaign.

Under both the Obama and Trump administrations, AFRICOM’s policy has been to publicly acknowledge the strikes through a press release or the “responses to questions” (RTQ) policy, which means that a mission will be avowed if AFRICOM is specifically asked about an occurrence that happened on a precise date; otherwise it may go unannounced. “We acknowledge whatever we’ve done,” said John Manley, the Africa Command’s media-relations chief. “If we say, ‘No, it did not happen,’ then no, it did not happen from US AFRICOM.”

Candice Tresch, a Pentagon spokesperson, explained the policy further: “When AFRICOM limits their acknowledgement to ‘response to query,’ it is because of a realistic operational-security concern, a significant force-protection matter, or potential diplomatic sensitivities.”

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Complicating this picture is the very real possibility that another US agency is also conducting strikes in Somalia. In March 2017, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that, according to unnamed officials, Trump had granted the CIA permission to launch drone strikes on its own. Under the Obama administration, the CIA had been used to gather intelligence and locate the targets, but the Pentagon was supposed to make the actual strike.

Daniel Mahanty, the US program director for the nonprofit Center for Civilians in Conflict, told me: “As far as we know, the CIA could be executing people through secret air strikes just about anywhere, and
for reasons only known to some in the government. Nothing would prevent it under this administration’s expansive interpretation of domestic and international law or what we know about its still-secret drone policy.”

This lack of transparency has produced an almost total sense of confusion over what the United States is doing with its air attacks in Somalia. Three previously unreported strikes came to light as I investigated the story of an attack relayed by Khadija Hassan Ali, a mother of three from Marka, a city about 60 miles south of Mogadishu. Ali said that her husband, Abdullahi Sheikh Hassan, died in late July from what she believes was a heart attack after nighttime strikes hit her village amid fighting between Al Shabab and government-led militias. She is certain of the timing because, in Somali culture, a wife formally mourns for four months and 10 days after the death of her husband, so she had the dates in mind when I talked with her in late November.

AFRICOM did not publicly announce any strikes in July, but a document leaked to me by an international human-rights organization indicated an attack on July 25 in Qalimow, a village to the north of Mogadishu and about 95 miles from Ali’s home. I approached AFRICOM and asked if any strikes had occurred between July 22 and 27. Applying RTQ, a spokesperson acknowledged a strike on July 23 but would not specify the location. After weeks of pressing, AFRICOM said the strike happened 30 miles north of Kismayo, Somalia’s southern port city, which is hundreds of miles from both Qalimow and Marka.

This information only makes the situation more puzzling: When asked to avow a strike that a major international organization noted on July 25, AFRICOM admitted a strike in an entirely different location on July 23, and neither of these strikes match Ali’s recollections. In other words, there may have been three different strikes—one acknowledged by AFRICOM, one noted by the international organization, and one recalled by Ali—all around the same time, none of which were previously made public, and only one of which came to light via RTQ.
Isaak Osman (an alias to protect his safety) told me about another air strike that AFRICOM says doesn't match its records. Osman said the strike killed his brother and almost certainly his uncle as well, and he insists that neither he nor his family members were part of Al Shabab.
Osman is from O’wdhiile, a village about 55 miles south of Mogadishu in Lower Shabelle. Around 5 pm in early July 2017, Osman said he heard an explosion. He waited until it seemed safe, and then ran to the farm that was hit—only to find the body of his 38-year-old brother. Osman said his brother was picking fruit with his uncle, 42-year-old Abdullahi, whom he has not seen since and presumes was killed in the blast.

A day later, Osman said, government soldiers came and inspected the scene. After they left, Al Shabab arrived and accused villagers of feeding the government information. Six members of the group interrogated Osman for seven days. He said they blindfolded him, beat him with their rifles, and shot him repeatedly in the leg.

After a local emir negotiated his release, Osman continued, he was tossed in a vegetable cart and left on the side of the road. Still suffering from the wounds of his torture, he took a four-hour minibus ride to Mogadishu, where he spent four months recovering at Medina Hospital. He said that during this time, Al Shabab kept threatening his father and surviving brother. Today, Osman lives in Geedweyne camp, a settlement near Afgooye. He has to stay there, he told me, because between the strikes and Al Shabab, “there is no space to live.”

AFRICOM doesn’t list any strikes near his location in July 2017, but in November 2017, it confirmed three previously unreported strikes on July 15, 20, and 21 to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, a British nonprofit newsroom. After repeated questioning, AFRICOM released the location of the three strikes to me; none are near Osman’s home. When approached with Osman’s story, AFRICOM stated that it didn’t match any of its records. This raises the possibility that it was a CIA strike; the CIA has not responded to any press inquiries for this article.
Aside from the mystery surrounding such strikes, there’s another critical area where transparency has decreased: civilian injuries and deaths. As mentioned earlier, AFRICOM maintains that its air strikes have not caused a single civilian casualty in Somalia.

I asked retired Brig. Gen. Donald Bolduc, who served as the head of Special Operations Command Africa from April 2015 to June 2017, if he thought that civilian casualties could have gone unrecorded. He said that he did, but in a follow-up message, he clarified: “There is a possibility. But I also know there are established procedures to avoid civilian casualties.”

In November, The Daily Beast reported, based on conversations with former counterterrorism officials and experts, that the review process after a strike involves planes making a second pass over the area hit to determine the extent of the damage. When asked about its procedures, AFRICOM said that it would not comment on its intelligence or surveillance methods.

What happens if civilian casualties are suspected is also muddy. Within AFRICOM, a Civilian Casualty Allegation Team is designated to
investigate, and it works with other agencies, NGOs, and governments, as well as media reports, to assess the claims.

However, two former Somali security officials—including Sanbalooshe, the former head of the National Intelligence and Security Agency—as well as a Somali legal expert and activist said the Somali government does not have the capacity to help investigate these strikes.

Sagal Bihi, a member of Parliament and the former chair of Somalia’s Human Rights, Gender, and Humanitarian Committee, told me that she had raised the issue of civilian casualties with the Ministry of Defense in 2017 and was told that the military “investigates as needed” into any such allegations. But the national military is barely functioning, and the clans that once controlled pockets of the country have complicated relationships with the government and may be reluctant to share information with it. Additionally, according to my interviews, Al Shabab bans the use of smartphones in the territories it holds, which makes taking photographs and sending information difficult. All of these factors make civilian casualties hard to investigate, but nearly every Somali I spoke with was certain that people with no connection to Al Shabab were being killed in the air strikes. “Civilian casualties will always exist,” Bihi said, “because we are talking about an enemy that really takes ‘human shield’ to the next level.”

Felix Horne, the senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch, told me in an e-mail that his organization “is concerned about ongoing allegations of civilian casualties caused by US drone strikes in the Middle Shabelle and Lower Shabelle regions, where much of the fight against Al Shabab is taking place.” He added, “The federal government of Somalia has not taken any known measures to investigate these claims.”

Somalia’s Office of the Prime Minister and Office of the President did not respond to queries about civilian casualties.

Further, two high-level former Somali security advisers say civilian casualties are all the more likely because the United States doesn’t have the ability to collect solid information on the ground. “There’s not enough intelligence to justify kinetic strikes,” said one. “They [the
US military] don’t have enough linguists. Even the CIA doesn’t go out [of the Green Zone],” an area of tight security in Mogadishu.

“There are very few people in the Pentagon that can even explain to you what is going on in East Africa off the top of their head,” General Bolduc admitted. “They have to have a scheduled meeting so they can read ahead and sound intelligent about it.”

I asked AFRICOM, the Pentagon, the CIA, and the National Security Council about their methods for determining whether the people killed in air strikes were members of Al Shabab, as well as the United States’ intelligence capabilities in Somalia. None responded to such questions.

Of the 25 Somalis displaced by air strikes that I interviewed, only one said that he was seeking answers to what happened. He’s speaking to human-rights organizations and the media, but most of the others communicated a sense of pain and bewilderment about why their villages had been hit. Osman, the man from O’wdhüile who lost his brother and uncle, said he assumed the attack didn’t intend to target civilians, that it had all been a mistake. But until the US government opens up about these strikes, it will be almost impossible for Osman or anyone else to learn who the United States is killing in Somalia and why, or what lethal errors we’re making.

Amanda Sperber is an East Africa–based freelance journalist.
Somali soldiers patrol Sanguuni military base south of Mogadishu, Somalia, on June 13. (Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP/Getty Images)

Somalia Is a Country Without an Army

The United Nations and foreign powers claim they are dedicated to building up the Somali National Army. Instead, they have become complicit in its dysfunction.

BY AMANDA SPERBER
AUGUST 7, 2018, 1:07 PM

MOGADISHU, Somalia—Last week, the U.N. Security Council unanimously agreed to extend the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) mandate in the country until May 2019. The security situation has been
getting worse by the day. On Sunday, two car bombs killed at least six people; one detonated in the capital, Mogadishu, and the other in a nearby town. A few days before, a popular young entrepreneur was murdered, sparking protests demanding accountability and better security. AMISOM first deployed to Somalia in 2007 with a six-month authorization to counter al-Shabab, a militant anti-government group. Although initially a marginal peacekeeping force of privately trained Ugandan soldiers, AMISOM has since expanded in size and in scope of mandate, and is now comprised of an estimated 22,000 troops from Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Sierra Leone. Unlike typical peace-support missions, AMISOM has taken the lead role in the counterinsurgency campaign, filling in as a de facto army until the Somali National Army (SNA) is strong enough to counter the jihadi group on its own.

“Somalia is like cleaning a pig,” one Ugandan AMISOM colonel told Foreign Policy. “You clean it, and it gets dirty.” He compared Somalia to Afghanistan. If the coalition in Afghanistan left, he argued, the Taliban would easily take the country back. The same was true for Somalia. Whether or not the colonel’s assessment is accurate, the extension of AMISOM’s mandate, now with more ambiguous language about an exit date, underscores the SNA’s grim situation.

Somalia, which Transparency International has rated the world’s most corrupt country for 11 years running, represents the worst of modern war and the international state-building economy. But Somalia wasn’t always a war zone. In the first decade after the British Somaliland protectorate and the U.N.-administered former Italian Somaliland colony gained independence and unified in 1960, the Somali Republic was a stable, relatively prosperous democracy. As politicians stoked nationalist sentiment in the name of a Greater Somalia, the country sought to build a formidable army, known locally as “The Lions of Africa,” with Soviet assistance. At the time, military academies in the country were so well resourced they had tanks to spare for practical training.

These days, after decades of military dictatorship, failed foreign escapades, civil war, and armed insurgency, there’s not even adequate funding for essentials like radios and protective gear. Many SNA soldiers operate in flip-flops.

Meanwhile, a conglomeration of countries are paying each other, and each other’s companies, ostensibly in support of Somalia as it rebuilds a national army. Each has its own military models that differ in ways big and small, from the way that soldiers salute to the chain of command. More significantly, each has different funding streams, various internal alliances, and broader strategic agendas.
Turkey has its own military academy. Qatar has one as well. The United Arab Emirates’ training facility shut down in April, a proxy in the Persian Gulf dispute. The Egyptians and the Sudanese are training officers. The British are conducting training in their own center, south of Mogadishu, in Baidoa. And the United States, as well as private U.S.-based security firms, are working with the Danab special operations forces on Baledogle air base. The United States used to provide funding for fuel and food for the SNA proper, but suspended that support in December because of fraud.

The SNA “could be highly effective,” said a foreign advisor to the Defense Ministry, who has worked in more than 20 countries and wishes to stay anonymous. “Turning the SNA into an army here, while difficult, is doable,” he added. But, he argued, “the way we’re doing it is impossible.”

After so many attempts at state-building and training national armies—not least of all in Iraq and Afghanistan—it seems as if the international community is following a failed blueprint.

The West has trained the three most abysmal armies in the world: the Iraqi Army, the Afghan Army, and Somali Army,” said Stig Jarle Hansen, an associate professor of international relations at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences.

None of this bodes well for the Somali people, and suggests that, even if AMISOM eventually follows through on its announced intent to leave, there will be private security firms, peacekeeping missions, and mercenaries in the country for the foreseeable future.
The dire straits of the SNA and the reason for AMISOM’s extension became immediately obvious during a trip through the men’s surgical ward at Mogadishu’s Madina hospital, which is filled with wounded soldiers.

There I met 48-year-old Abdullahi Awayle Ali, who joined the army after he was arrested by al-Shabab. His relatives negotiated his freedom, but Ali was worried that he’d get stopped again. He decided he needed to get out of his village. He joined the SNA and, after training, was made an officer. Ali was stationed in rural Buurdhuubo district, southwest of Mogadishu, close to the Ethiopian border, where, early one morning in 2016, al-Shabab attacked his compound. The troops managed to hold off the advance, but not before the SNA guard at the front gate was killed.

Amid the ongoing battle, Ali ran to retrieve the corpse. A bullet pierced his leg in the process. Ali made it safely back to the compound but he was badly injured. He was also stuck. Buurdhuubo is a remote base, and al-Shabab controlled the surrounding area. The soldiers could defend its main gates, but to beat a path through the opening to the nearest town would mean almost certain death.
For nearly a year, the soldiers focused on their own survival, not on routing al-Shabab. Ali, along with his fellow troops, was marooned, his thigh festering. “The SNA didn’t have the ability to do anything,” he said. Everyone, it appeared, was doing what they could. His early anger dissipated over the 300-plus days it took before they were able to leave the base; a nearby Ethiopian convoy with enough armored vehicles to spare organized an evacuation.

Ali and his fellow soldiers were ill-equipped and disorganized. Many SNA soldiers who’ve completed training often lack the skills to correctly hold their weapons, if they’ve managed to get their hands on one.

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The European Union Training Mission, for example, does not train with firearms. (Its officials did not respond to a request for an interview about their training.)

It is difficult to get a clear answer about who provides weapons to the SNA. The United States, United Kingdom, and the EU don’t give out lethal equipment. The Gulf states and Egypt openly sell or distribute weapons, flying or shipping them into Mogadishu, where they are meant to be stored at an armory before they are registered and then sent to various SNA posts, but guns and ammunition tend to get distributed to clans or sold on the black market instead. If there isn’t any political gain in getting the supplies from Mogadishu to Baidoa, for example, then no one will pay for them to get to their intended destination.

Ali is comparatively lucky; the government is funding his hospital stay. He’s getting three meals per day and treatment for his massively swollen leg. The SNA is giving his family food assistance as well, he says. Still, it’s a large sacrifice to be made by someone whose last paycheck of $100 arrived months ago—from the United Kingdom, one of the many countries providing intermittent stipends to the SNA soldiers.

Without streamlined support it’s hard to see how people like Ali can be part of this institution—indeed, it’s difficult to see how the SNA is an institution at all. Complicating matters further, it is not uncommon for a family to have members in both the army and al-Shabab. Ali’s son was a member of al-Shabab, having joined after they offered him a mobile phone. Ali disowned his son, but the son was then motivated to quit on his own after al-Shabab killed his mother, Ali’s wife. Now he’s in the SNA.
“I have no doubt that al-Shabab have infiltrated the Federal Government of Somalia as double agents,” former spokesman for the Ministry of Internal Security Abdulaziz Ali Ibrahim said in an interview with FP. Such infiltration of the security sector creates serious problems.

At least 21 people were killed and an unknown number injured in Mogadishu in July as al-Shabab was able to get through a number of government checkpoints to attack targets including a popular hotel and the Interior Ministry compound. Last month, the office of the deputy director of the National Intelligence and Security Agency was raided, allegedly by men with ties to al-Shabab. Members of the group infiltrate the SNA and NISA, often donning uniforms to strike checkpoints, training camps, and soft targets.

According to the to the Defense Ministry advisor, it’s an open secret that members of the government—and even members of the international community—will hire al-Shabab to kill or intimidate their political rivals. A prime example was the attack last year on the Dayah Hotel, where numerous politicians were staying. Twenty-eight people were killed and 43 were injured in the attack, for which al-Shabab claimed responsibility.

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“Have you seen anyone in Somalia define al-Shabab?” a prominent businessman asked. “You have to be able to define who the enemy is in order to defeat them,” he argued.

The businessman’s comments get to the heart of what so-called Western development partners don’t publicly acknowledge: al-Shabab is ostensibly one with the population, including with the government. While some of its members reside on military bases, many live in cities, towns, and villages. They are not a separate entity but part of the overall social fabric. This makes putting together a “national” army difficult.

Most of al-Shabab’s activity is domestic. When they do stage international attacks, the targets are generally in countries that are part of AMISOM or that otherwise meddle in Somalia. The 2013 siege at an upscale shopping mall in Nairobi that killed 67 people is one such example. The attack killing 148 mainly Christian students at Garissa University in northern Kenya in 2015 is another.
Within Somalia, al-Shabab is far more prolific; bombings on government buildings, hotels, restaurants, and sports stadiums are weekly occurrences. More than 500 people were killed on Oct. 14, 2017, when twin vehicle bombs detonated at a busy intersection during rush hour on a work day. Buses of children were blown up and a whole city block, lined with new homes and offices, was leveled in an instant. While al-Shabab has still not formally claimed responsibility for the massacre—since doing so would likely turn too many people against the group—they’re the only credible perpetrator.

A car bomb killed at least three and injured five outside a popular restaurant on the busy street of Maka al-Mukaram in Mogadishu on Aug. 5. (Mohamed Abdiwahab/AFP/Getty Images)

Somalia has massive geographic importance. It connects Africa to the Middle East and possesses the African mainland’s longest coastline, stretching nearly 1,900 miles. Each year, billions of dollars’ worth of goods pass through its waterways en route from Asia and the Middle East to Europe. The country has a wealth of largely unexploited natural resources, including uranium, iron, and copper—as well as oil potential. This is an incentive for the international community to stabilize the country and rid it of radicalism.

The United States has provided more than $900 million in bilateral assistance to AMISOM, and an additional $720 million to the U.N. Support Office in Somalia, that works with the army. By 2016, the EU was contributing about $23 million per month to AMISOM and spending about
$35 million per year on the training mission. The funding is capricious, though: In February, the German government announced it would be withdrawing its support from the EU training mission, citing a lack of progress. Money from the Gulf states is tied to their separate geopolitical crisis, in which Somalia is both bit player and big pawn. Turkey, meanwhile, remains a steadfast partner because Somalia is its largest humanitarian mission.

It took four years of dogged fighting to wrest control of Mogadishu back from under the complete, public influence of al-Shabab. The West still refused to commit its own troops but funneled money to AMISOM while turning a blind eye to the rampant human rights abuses, especially sexual assault, committed by its forces—another element that aids the jihadi group’s propaganda mission.

The facts that AMISOM hasn’t fully flushed out al-Shabab, and that the SNA remains so incapable after so many years, have fueled rumors—even among some educated, worldly Somalis who don’t support al-Shabab—that such chaos is in fact the Somali federal government’s end goal, allowing foreign forces to remain on the ground and in control while government officials take their share of the spoils.

A much-heralded agreement made in London in April 2017 established a “national security architecture” for the first time, but none of its milestones are close to being met. Hussein Sheikh Ali, the founder of the Hiraal Institute, a security think tank in Mogadishu, says there is no “real political will” to implement the security architecture because so many of the people are benefitting from the status quo and are nervous about ceding power to the more federalist structure designed in London. No one trusts anyone.

“The Somalis lost the war and the world is trying to pander to their every need to show to their home nations they are making progress; meanwhile, [Somali government officials] are laughing all the way to the banks and meanwhile secretly supporting al-Shabab,” said an SNA trainer in an email,
stressing that government figures “don’t want to solve any problems because they want the money to keep coming.”

One of the concerns with the extended AMISOM mandate, or any externally funded security protection, is that the Somali government will have more incentive to extend the status quo and not invest in the army. “Building the SNA is more of a priority for the international community than it is for Somali politicians,” said E.J. Hogendoorn, the International Crisis Group’s deputy program director for Africa.

Those perverse incentives have contributed to systemic corruption in the SNA. Indeed, the flailing army feeds off the disorganization and greed of the countries and companies supporting it, creating room for al-Shabab’s infiltration. Many Somalis are now starting to call for a reconciliation with the extremist group, while Western governments say they do not engage with outfits they’ve branded as terrorists. The result will be band-aid armies like AMISOM or a country overrun with mercenaries.

“You can buy an army here,” the advisor to the Defense Ministry told me bluntly. “Collectively, we as the international community have been supporting nothing but a criminal patronage network for years.”

Editor’s note, April 9, 2019: A sentence regarding al-Shabab’s influence and telecommunications surveillance in Somalia that appeared in the original version of this article has been removed, and the article has been updated.

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Does America Know Who Its Airstrike Victims Are?

A recent strike in Somalia raises questions about whether Africom investigates civilian casualties.

By Amanda Sperber
| May 7, 2019, 12:35 PM

A Somali soldier at Sanguuni military base south of Mogadishu on June 13, 2018. MOHAMED ABDIWAHAB/AFP/Getty Images

MOGADISHU—Ibrahim Hirei had been driving back to Mogadishu with two friends on March 18 when his car was hit in an American airstrike. Hirei, who had spent the day in the village of Muuri inspecting his family’s farm, was killed, along with a second man in the car. The third passenger died later in the hospital.
A press release the U.S. military command in Africa issued the next day said the strike was aimed at degrading “the terrorist network and its recruiting efforts in the region”—a reference to the Somali group al-Shabab, a jihadi organization linked to al Qaeda.

“At this time, it is assessed this airstrike killed three (3) terrorists,” the release said.

But an examination by Foreign Policy suggests that Hirei—and possibly the other two passengers as well—had no connection to terrorism and might have been wrongly targeted.

If true, their deaths add to a rising toll of civilians killed in U.S. bombardments in Somalia, which have surged during the term of President Donald Trump. In the days and weeks following the strike, the United States Africa Command—or Africom—appears to have done little to verify details about the three men, raising the possibility that others killed in U.S. strikes and labeled as terrorists might also have been innocent victims.

“My innocent brother became a victim of that airstrike. Now we are struggling to manage the life of the family left behind,” Hirei’s older brother, Ahmed Hassan Hirei, told Foreign Policy in a text message. He said his brother had seven children and spent much of his time tending to the family businesses, including a shop and a gas station. Ibrahim Hirei had no connection to al-Shabab, he said. “I am requesting the U.S. government investigate the airstrike.”

Ahmed Hassan Hirei, who works for an international humanitarian organization in Mogadishu, said he knew the other two men in the car—their families were neighbors.

The press release issued by Africom the day after the attack said U.S. officials were “aware of reports alleging civilian casualties.” It said Africom would review the details of the incident, “including any relevant information provided by third parties.”

But more than seven weeks later, Hirei’s older brother said that no U.S. representatives reached out to him or members of his family.

When Foreign Policy contacted Africom with the family’s allegation, spokesperson John Manley said the military’s assessment was still underway and might last a few more weeks. He then asked for the Hirei family’s contact information.

Amnesty International says at least 14 civilians have been killed in the ramped-up U.S. air campaign since 2017. Africom puts the number at two.

Brian Castner, who co-authored Amnesty International’s recent investigation into civilian casualties in U.S. strikes in Somalia, wrote in the New York Times last month that there are very likely more cases that can’t be proved because of the secrecy of the operations.

“As far as we are aware, AFRICOM doesn’t conduct on-the-ground investigations after their airstrikes. And so they miss a large body of evidence, namely the eye-witness testimony of the survivors of the strikes,” Castner told Foreign Policy in an email.
Hussein Sheikh-Ali, a former national security and counterterrorism advisor to Somalia’s current and previous president, said the increasing allegations of civilian casualties are “making me doubt Africom’s capabilities to gather an accurate picture on the ground, let alone piece together information after the incident.” Sheikh-Ali is the founder of the Hiraal Institute, a security think tank.

Africom’s process for assessing civilian casualties requires neither on-the-ground interviews nor conversations with eyewitnesses, according to a document reviewed by Foreign Policy. The document mostly outlines the chain-of-command reports to be submitted with no clarity on how information should be gathered.

Africom would not describe how it identifies a person as a member of al-Shabab. “We use a number of intelligence methods to determine the enemy. We do not discuss those methods for operational security reasons,” Manley wrote in an email to Foreign Policy.

Rita Siemion, the director of national security advocacy for Human Rights First, said this lack of clarity and transparency is the crux of the problem.

“The Department of Defense can label people as terrorists or militants, and it’s nearly impossible to question that designation from the outside,” she said. “This means they can get it wrong, including because they use an overly broad definition of who is lawfully targetable, without adequate checks and safeguards.”

Hina Shamsi, the director of the ACLU National Security Project, said the U.S. policy compounds the hardship of families when their loved ones are killed.

“They are in the position of trying to prove people innocent of being alleged ‘terrorists’ without knowing what the United States suspects or why,” she said in an email.

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