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America's Least-Noticed War

While no one was watching, the Trump administration started launching a wrath of strikes in Somalia.



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President Donald Trump has been pushing to wind down military operations in Syria and Afghanistan. Congress has belatedly been scrutinizing the American role in Yemen. But at the same time, the Trump administration has been dramatically escalating its military operations in Somalia, with little public scrutiny or debate about the operation's goals or consequences.

Just weeks after taking office, Trump [issued an order](#) designating parts of Somalia an "area of active hostilities," which substantially relaxed restrictions on the targets and potential civilian casualties of air- and ground strikes. Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, commander of the U.S. Africa Command, has [declined to characterize](#) the U.S. as "at war" in Somalia in

congressional testimony, but the area of active hostilities designation and the corresponding uptick in strikes suggest the military is effectively treating the country as a war zone. According to [data from New America](#), including drone strikes, manned strikes, and ground raids, the U.S. carried out 37 strikes in 2017, all but one after Trump took office and almost three times as many as in the last full year of the Obama administration. Last year it was 43. In 2019, the U.S. is on pace to *triple* that number.

These strikes have likely killed more than 900 people, but remarkably, according to Africom, these have all been militants from the jihadi group al-Shabab. Not a single civilian casualty in Somalia from U.S. operations has been reported under the Trump administration (or, for that matter, the Obama administration). While hard to believe, this claim has been difficult to disprove, given the lack of independent reporting in the parts of Somalia where these strikes occur. (Al-Shabab regularly claims civilian casualties in these strikes but has its own motivations for doing so.) But a [report released Wednesday](#) by Amnesty International investigates five U.S. airstrikes in 2017 and 2018 in the Lower Shabelle region of southern Somalia, finding, based on interviews with witnesses and survivors, that 14 civilians were killed and eight injured.

The Trump administration has not given a legal justification for its operations. Nor has it disclosed new standards for targeting and avoiding civilian casualties.

“Africom has always said there were zero civilian casualties, but that suggests they don’t seem to know who they’re killing,” Daphne Eviatar, director of Amnesty’s Security With Human Rights program, told me. Africom has denied the allegations in the report, saying civilian casualties “do not appear likely based on contradictory intelligence that cannot be disclosed because of operational security limitations.” But the report, along with some recent [higher-level media attention](#), may be a sign that America’s least-noticed war is getting some long-overdue attention.

Conflict has plagued Somalia since 1991, when the government of dictator Siad Barre collapsed, and America has been involved for almost that long. President George H.W. Bush deployed U.S. troops in Somalia in 1992 as part of what started as a U.N. humanitarian relief mission but quickly shifted to active combat, culminating in the [Black Hawk Down incident](#) in October 1993, which led to the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The first recorded post-9/11 U.S. operation in Somalia was a raid to capture an al-Qaida suspect in 2003. The U.S. role grew significantly after 2006, when an Islamist group known as the Islamic Courts Union took over the capital, Mogadishu. The U.S. backed an Ethiopian intervention to oust the ICU, some members of which formed al-Shabab, an extremist group that imposes strict sharia in the areas it controls and has pledged allegiance to al-Qaida. Al-Shabab has been pushed out of Somalia’s major cities by an African Union peacekeeping force known as AMISOM, but it is still active in a [significant portion of southern Somalia](#).

Al-Shabab is undoubtedly brutal and dangerous. A 2017 bombing in Mogadishu that [killed more than 500 people](#) was one of the single deadliest terrorist attacks since 9/11. It has also targeted neighboring countries, most recently [an attack](#) in January on a hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, that killed 21.

Nonetheless, it’s far from clear that al-Shabab poses a threat to the U.S. that would necessitate a military operation on this scale. “For all the yammering in Washington about al-Shabab being an al-Qaida proxy, they have never launched a direct strike on U.S. interests,” Bronwyn Bruton, deputy director of the Atlantic Council’s Africa Center, told me in an interview. “The only times they’ve launched strikes outside Somalia have been in retaliation to U.S. efforts to build a government, or the presence of forces from foreign governments.” The George W. Bush administration’s initial covert operations in Somalia were ordered under the authority of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force against the perpetrators of 9/11, but al-Shabab’s operational ties to al-Qaida today are minimal. According to

Amnesty's Eviatar, the Trump administration has not given a legal justification for its operations.

Nor has it disclosed the new standards for targeting and avoiding civilian casualties under Trump's new "active hostilities" directive. According to one senior military commander interviewed for Amnesty's report, individuals are now considered targetable based on age, gender, location, and geographical proximity to al-Shabab, meaning all military-aged males in particular locations. The criteria are reminiscent of controversial standards that were [reportedly used for drone strikes](#) under the Obama administration (though never confirmed). There's also an open question of whether the military is the only U.S. entity carrying out strikes in Somalia. Four of the five strikes investigated in Amnesty's report were claimed by Africom; a fifth was not. A [recent investigation](#) by the Nation found evidence of yet more unclaimed strikes, suggesting that perhaps the CIA or another U.S. government agency is involved.

Unlike the Pentagon, the CIA does not report estimates of civilian casualties in any of its operations, a practice affirmed by an [executive order from Trump](#) earlier this month.

All this raises the question of why the U.S. is suddenly so much more engaged in Somalia, which has after all been unstable for decades. Bruton suspects that "it's a sense of desperation. There's an awareness that the strategy of Somalia—to empower the government and build a national government—has failed entirely."

While AMISOM's mission has been [extended multiple times](#), the countries involved in the mission—Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and others, which have borne the brunt of the fighting as well as al-Shabab's terrorist backlash—are anxious to wind down the operations and withdraw the remaining 22,000 troops from the country. Many experts believe the Somali state would collapse after this happens.

The Trump administration "doesn't want to do the kind of partner military capacity building that the Obama administration was doing," said Bruton. "They're looking for a lighter footprint, which means they have to do whatever they can to inflict whatever damage on Shabab in the time they have left."

Unfortunately, it's not always clear that these operations are really inflicting damage on al-Shabab. Somali society is divided into dozens of clans and subclans, and conflict in the country is more often driven by clan rivalry than allegiance to al-Shabab or the government. These dynamics are not always easy for outsiders to parse. Bruton said, "The Somali government often uses the al-Shabab charge to wipe out people either to get the land they want or out of clan rivalry." The U.S. military can find itself unwittingly drawn into these fights between clans. An investigation by Christina Goldbaum of the Daily Beast suggests [this is exactly what led](#) to a U.S. ground operation that killed 10 civilians in 2017. (Africom denied the reports of civilian casualties.)

While the particular dynamics of Somalia's conflict are unique, the overall state of affairs—the U.S. propping up an unpopular central government and finding itself enmeshed in complex local conflicts while trying to fight a global war on terrorism—is certainly familiar from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and elsewhere. All of which makes it puzzling that the escalation of U.S. involvement in Somalia hasn't attracted the kind of attention that those other conflicts have. Perhaps it's the lack of U.S. casualties (although a U.S. special operations soldier was killed in [an al-Shabab attack last June](#)) or the lack of media reporting from much of Somalia, or simply public indifference. But now, America may finally be starting to notice and ask questions about just why we're fighting a war in Somalia

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