

# The United States in the Horn of Africa

## The Role of the Military

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This article focuses on the role that the US military has played in the Horn of Africa, especially since 11 September 2001. It addresses whether or not the organization has embraced strategic knowledge and perspective in its overall approach in countering violent extremism and assisting with sustainable development, as well as in designing activities and modifying them over the years. In particular, it examines the civil affairs (CA) activities of the Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) in attempting to win hearts and minds and build partnership capacity.<sup>1</sup> In the 2000s, well drilling by US military CA units was intended to provide environmental security and sustainable development for Somali pastoralists, win their hearts and minds, and prevent them from sympathizing with violent extremist organizations, particularly al-Shabaab in Somalia.<sup>2</sup> The strategic shortcomings of the hearts-and-minds campaign led the CJTF-HOA in the 2010s to embrace strategic knowledge and shift to an approach that emphasized building the partnership capacity and CA capabilities of Eastern African militaries. In particular, the CJTF-HOA's strategic concentration has been on strengthening the capabilities of militaries involved in peace enforcement in Somalia and enabling them to win hearts and minds.

The article also analyzes the strategy of the US government towards countering violent extremism in Somalia and the Horn of Africa since the US Embassy bombings by al-Qaeda in August 1998 and especially since 11 September 2001. The US approach has been an “indirect” one, which contrasts with direct intervention in Afghanistan and

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Iraq. The United States has relied on partners in Uganda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti as well as Somalis themselves to do the fighting in Somalia; further, it has helped rebuild the Somali state and strengthen states and societies in the struggle against extremism. America has conducted “dual track” diplomacy, supporting the reconstitution of the Republic of Somalia as well as nonstate actors such as warlords and the breakaway Republic of Somaliland, which would fight against violent extremists. It also conducted what has been called “drone diplomacy” against violent extremists. At issue are lessons learned over the past decade and areas where various components of US strategy stand and where they might lead. Also at issue is US support for sustainable development in the Horn. Since 2009 the US Agency for International Development (USAID) has taken the lead in sustainable development, and the US military has dropped back to a supporting role.

The Department of State (DOS) and Department of Defense (DOD) have had divergent approaches towards the Horn of Africa. The DOD has concentrated on counterterrorism by special operations forces and drones as well as regionwide engagement and the building of partnership capacity, particularly through the CJTF-HOA. The DOD has been reluctant to become too deeply involved in Somali affairs, partly because of the October 1993 “Black Hawk down” experience (and the death of 18 US special forces personnel), which led to the withdrawal of US peacekeeping and enforcement forces. Since then, America has been unwilling to put “boots on the ground” in large numbers in Somalia again. Furthermore, the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq monopolized the DOD’s attention since 2001. CJTF-HOA personnel have not been allowed to operate in any part of Somalia although US special forces have remained active there covertly. The CJTF-HOA has played a lead role in military strategy in the Horn of Africa, having devised the hearts-and-minds campaign and built the partnership-capacity approach. Recently, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) has worked to control US security policy in the Horn, subordinating the CJTF-HOA and attempting to wrest control of security cooperation from US embassies in the region.

The DOS responded with the East African Counter-Terrorism Initiative and later the East African Regional Strategic Initiative, both launched as interagency efforts to enable African states to strengthen their borders, intelligence, and policing capacity as well as enhance aviation security and safety.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the DOS has backed African and Somali partners to defeat al-Shabaab and reconstitute a state in Somalia, an action that would put an end to a significant source of violent extremism in the Horn of Africa. This included supporting proxies in Somalia, hoping that they would curb extremist expansion. Initially, the DOS supported Somali warlords as a counter against extremists. In December 2006, the United States acquiesced to the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia as a way of defeating extremist elements of the Islamic Courts Union.<sup>4</sup> Since 2007 America has spent \$650 million, and the DOS has led in arranging a wide range of support for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Somalia in hopes that they could defeat al-Shabaab and establish national security and constitutional order. The European Union contributed a similar

amount (411 million euros) over the same period. The strategy met with skepticism from those who asserted that Somalia could hope for nothing better than “stability” and a balance of power among the clans and subclans.<sup>5</sup> However, in 2012 the DOS strategy scored significant successes when AMISOM and Somali forces pushed al-Shabaab out of urban centers in Somalia and put in place a new constitution and government of Somalia with a president from civil society. The United States has entered a new phase in Somalia that calls for deciding whether to continue to engage indirectly or become more directly involved in rebuilding that country and preventing the resurgence of al-Shabaab and violent extremism.

### Strategic Knowledge and Perspective

Strategic knowledge and perspective in countering violent extremists involve evaluation of US interests and goals as well as the ways and means to achieve them. The primary US interest is security from violent extremist attacks against not only US embassies, businesses, and citizens in the region but also the homeland. One threat comes from pro-al-Shabaab Somali nationals living in Minneapolis and other American cities who could mount attacks on the homeland and in the Horn of Africa. Al-Shabaab, which has links with al-Qaeda Central along the Afghan-Pakistan border and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, has issued threats against US interests. However, the threat from al-Shabaab is less serious than the one posed by the al-Qaeda organizations, which could still carry out attacks on the United States and its interests. Al-Shabaab has struck outside Somalia but has not yet attacked US interests in Africa or the United States.

Given American interests and the threat, the strategic options have been elimination, containment within the borders of Somalia, or marginalization within Somalia. Elimination would have proven overly costly and unachievable; al-Shabaab has been too elusive and would probably morph into a Somali nationalist organization. Containment is viable but risky; al-Shabaab still could strike US interests in the Horn of Africa and the homeland. The marginalization of al-Shabaab is feasible and the most desirable choice for US security interests, weakening the organization so that militants cannot attack the United States and its interests. In regard to ways of realizing the ends, the United States had three options. The first option involved securing the borderlands of Somalia in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti and conducting counterterrorism operations inside Somalia. The second entailed working with African forces and Somalis to marginalize al-Shabaab and reconstitute the Somali state. The DOD chose the first option starting in 2003, and the DOS adopted the second option starting in 2006. In regard to means, pursuing an elimination strategy and placing US boots on the ground in Somalia would have cost tens of billions of dollars and American lives. The containment of al-Shabaab has cost the DOD billions of dollars, and the marginalization of that organization has cost the DOS hundreds of millions of dollars spent on Ugandan, Burundian, and Kenyan forces. America eschewed a third option to put large numbers of US boots on the ground in Somalia to eliminate al-Shabaab.

The CJTF-HOA plan to win the hearts and minds of Somali pastoralists did not seem indicative of strategic knowledge and perspective. Instead, it addressed a peripheral issue that, at the most, may have had limited bearing on Somalia, and it attempted to contain al-Shabaab rather than marginalize the movement. Further, the strategy of US CA teams working with African CA teams to build their capabilities appears to have had limited impact. In particular, Ugandan and Kenyan CA teams have not engaged with Somalis as the United States might have liked.

In explaining the US military's shortcomings in embracing strategic knowledge and perspective in the Horn of Africa, one hypothesis holds that the more casualty averse a military force, the less its ability to apply strategic knowledge and perspective to fighting extremists. Another maintains that the US military will probably seek out roles and missions no matter how detached from strategy when it has little strategic vision, thus producing "mission creep."

Concerning organizational learning, the CJTF-HOA and its CA teams rotate every year or less while diplomacy, development, and defense officials in the US embassies do so every three years. The following hypothesis seems to apply to the US military in the Horn of Africa: stable, mature organizations with leaders held accountable are better able to learn and change in an ambiguous environment, whereas unstable organizations with constantly rotating leaders are not as capable of learning.<sup>6</sup>

Evidently, the DOS strategy and approach were more effective than those of the US military. The DOS focused on Somalia and devised plans to push back violent extremists and reconstitute the Somali state, thereby marginalizing al-Shabaab and exhibiting strategic knowledge and perspective. The State Department also exhibited organizational learning and adjustment from its failed approaches. In fairness to the DOD, its mission was to support the DOS in security cooperation pertaining to Somalia, and AFRICOM and the CJTF-HOA conducted considerable training and a number of exercises with Ugandan, Burundian, and Kenyan forces. However, the DOD also demonstrated a reluctance to engage with AMISOM and the Somali TFG before 2012.

## **The State Department Approach in the Horn of Africa: Focus on Somalia**

It appeared that Somalia would prove the most difficult of all failed states to reconstitute with a top-down security and state-building approach. Therefore, the DOS was advised to confine its efforts to a bottom-up peace-building approach. In terms of state security, Somalia has ranked at the bottom of the list of failed states because it has lacked state institutions for more than two decades.<sup>7</sup> The TFG was supposed to pave the way for the reconstitution of government in Somalia, but it has been corrupt and heavy-handed.<sup>8</sup> In terms of state failure and elite corruption, the situation in Somalia is comparable to the cases of Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Assistant Secretary of State Johnnie Carson articulated the top-down state-building policy of the Obama administration in March 2010:

U.S. policy in Somalia is guided by our support for the Djibouti peace process. The Djibouti peace process is an African-led initiative which enjoys the support of IGAD, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. It also enjoys the support of the African Union and the key states in the region. The Djibouti peace process has also been supported by the United Nations, the European Union, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Conference. The Djibouti peace process recognizes the importance of trying to put together an inclusive Somali government and takes into account the importance of the history, culture, clan, and sub-clan relations that have driven the conflict in Somalia for the past 20 years.<sup>9</sup>

Policy circles debated the feasibility of a top-down security approach for Somalia versus a bottom-up “stability” one, which would take into account representation from clans and interclan dynamics.<sup>10</sup> For more than five years, the DOS and other entities pursued a policy of attempting to establish nation-state security in Somalia so that al-Shabaab could be defeated and the process of peace building, renewal, and representation could begin to take hold throughout the country. The argument maintained that state security was essential before representation and renewal could fully develop. In this vein, Ugandan and Burundian AMISOM peacekeepers (i.e., peace enforcers) and TFG forces fought to gain control of Mogadishu from 2007 to 2011.

In spite of the difficulties with state building and stability in Somalia, the DOS and other entities continued to pursue a top-down security approach due to an inclination towards states and sovereignty as the basis for peace and security. They persisted with the Somali peace process that led to establishment of the TFG and AMISOM along with the ultimate goal of reconstituting the Republic of Somalia. The DOS supported the African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, and concerned African states in the peacemaking, enforcement, and state-building project, hoping that the Somalia problem could finally be resolved and prevent al-Qaeda and other extremists from establishing a base there. Thus, the DOS and other entities inherently believed that the establishment of a skeleton state—with some form of representation and a protomilitary—would inevitably enhance security, bring stability, and bolster confidence that interclan dynamics could be managed by an inclusive government.<sup>11</sup> In that vein, Somali leaders received an August 2012 deadline to pressure them to end the TFG and establish a permanent government in Mogadishu.

Contrary to the contention that a top-down security approach by the DOS would not prove feasible in Somalia, AMISOM and TFG forces strengthened and went on the offensive against al-Shabaab. Between 2007 and 2011, training and equipping of Ugandan and Burundian AMISOM forces under the DOS's Africa Contingency Operations Assistance and Training program by contractors (e.g., Bancroft Global Development Corporation) were important in raising the level of AMISOM forces to a point where they could fight al-Shabaab and prevail.

Analysis shows that the top-down, indirect approach of the DOS with a concentration on Somalia has brought significant change to Eastern Africa and that several factors have partially validated it. The DOS cultivated Uganda and Burundi, both of which made

a long-term commitment of several thousand troops to the AMISOM mission. The State Department ensured that AMISOM forces were properly trained and equipped. The political process moved forward to the point where the United States recognized the Republic of Somalia in January 2013—for the first time in 22 years. In comparison, the US military approach was more indirect and less effective than that of the DOS.

### **The US Military Approach in the Horn of Africa and the Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa**

After the US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the United States identified the Horn of Africa as one of the areas where al-Qaeda had to be countered. In particular, al-Qaeda operatives were moving back and forth between the East African coast and the Arabian Peninsula. The DOD and US Central Command established the CJTF-HOA in Djibouti to interdict al-Qaeda militants.

Such interdiction of al-Qaeda operatives diminished, leading to a search for other roles and missions. CA activity began in 2003 as the CJTF-HOA explored new roles and missions. In 2005 the task force's CA activity ramped up in a campaign to win hearts and minds in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. It included the drilling of wells for Somali pastoralists living in areas adjacent to Somalia (especially in Kenya's North East Province and Ethiopia's Somali or Ogaden Province) to provide water for sustainable development, especially for their herds. The CJTF-HOA's CA teams also built schools and clinics to help local populations in the provision of education and health care. The strategy to provide Somali pastoralists with water would supposedly win Somali hearts and minds for the United States and Horn of Africa states while lessening support for violent extremists, including al-Qaeda. It sought to win over Somalis in Ethiopia's Ogaden/Somali Region and Kenya's North East Province and thereby have an effect inside Somalia since clan linkages exist across borders. Further, the strategy envisioned building rapport between Ethiopian and Kenyan authorities and their Somali populations.

Somali pastoralists have faced such problems as excess livestock and insufficient water and grazing land. They move back and forth from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti to Somalia seeking these necessities. However, the CJTF-HOA teams have had limited knowledge of not only Somali pastoralists and clan politics but also sensitivities of the Ethiopian and Kenyan governments towards their Somali populations.

The CJTF-HOA campaign was based on the experience of two commanding generals who had served with the US Marine Corps as noncommissioned officers in the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support counterinsurgency program in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> The CA campaign launched with approval of the Ethiopian and Kenyan governments and limited participation by some of their militaries. The campaign experienced some initial successes—for instance, in drilling wells side-by-side with Kenyan drilling teams in the Mandera Triangle where Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia meet. The CJTF-HOA also began to cooperate with USAID in its CA projects. The “diplomacy,

development, defense” approach emerged, including cooperation among the CJTF-HOA, USAID, and US embassies in the region.<sup>13</sup>

The campaign scored some initial successes but experienced serious setbacks in Ethiopia in 2007 and Kenya in 2009. In 2007 Ethiopia asked the CJTF-HOA’s CA teams to leave the Ogaden/Somali region, believing that they were aiding elements associated with the Ogaden National Liberation Front. A particularly important event occurred when armed US military personnel entered the Ogaden region and attempted to deceive Ethiopian security personnel into thinking they were Red Cross aid workers.<sup>14</sup>

Some officials in US embassies in the region were skeptical about the CJTF-HOA’s chances of succeeding in its CA campaign.<sup>15</sup> In 2008 a study commissioned by the political affairs office in the US Embassy in Nairobi led to the CA teams being asked to vacate the Mandera Triangle. Afterwards, the Kenyan government asked them to leave North East province altogether. Therefore, sensitivities of the two most important states in the Horn of Africa, as well as those of skeptical US officials, circumscribed the CJTF-HOA and its CA activities in the most strategic areas. Forced to reformulate its approach, the task force became less attentive to Somali pastoralists and less effective in helping to reach US security goals.<sup>16</sup>

In 2007 AFRICOM joined the CJTF-HOA as military organizations involved in promoting sustainable development; plans proceeded until AFRICOM became fully operational in October 2008. In 2009 the Obama administration came to office, and the State Department asserted its lead role in US African policy, advising AFRICOM and the CJTF-HOA to play a supporting role to USAID and US embassies in promoting sustainable development, which led to a scaling back of their sustainable development roles. In early 2011, Gen Carter Ham became commander of AFRICOM and moved it further away from a development role and more towards making it a more traditional geographical *combatant* command.

The CJTF-HOA has continued to try to locate CA teams in “strategic locations” near Somalia. For instance, teams are in the vicinity of Dire Dawa and Harar in proximity to Ethiopia’s Somali Region. At the same time, CA teams have carried out projects in countries that support US goals in the Horn, including Djibouti, Uganda, and Burundi. Djibouti is the default location where CA teams have been sent when they cannot be placed elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

The CJTF-HOA commander must deal with the problem of a combined joint task force operating in a Title 22 environment in which the DOS and ambassadors are in charge rather than a Title 10 war-fighting environment.<sup>18</sup> Commanders in Southwest Asia are accustomed to operating in Title 10 environments where war-fighting authorization has allowed them greater power in what they can do and how they spend money. However, in a Title 22 environment, the US ambassador is in charge and can veto or modify any CA project as well as uses of Title 10 funds.

The US Sixth Fleet, operating out of Bahrain as part of US Naval Forces Central Command, has been responsible for most of the international waters off the coast of Somalia and for US counterpiracy efforts. The latter have been one of the CJTF-HOA’s

lines of effort but mainly in a supporting role. Ultimately, the stabilization of Somalia with the task force's help should lead to further reductions in piracy.<sup>19</sup>

The CJTF-HOA also has sought to influence host militaries so that they become proficient in CA, hoping they can win hearts and minds at home and in Somalia. However, Kenya and Uganda CA teams have engaged with the CJTF-HOA, but they have not applied their training and expertise in Somalia. The Kenyan military's CA teams were split up and embedded in companies.<sup>20</sup> Uganda has not deployed CA teams to Somalia. Burundian troops have engaged with Somalis in Mogadishu, but the military did not have CA teams to carry out that task. The Ethiopian military claims that it is still a popular-based institution after 20 years in power and has refused to engage the CJTF-HOA CA teams.<sup>21</sup> The Rwandan Defense Force has engaged with the teams; however, its CA teams are in Darfur rather than Somalia. The question is whether or not the CJTF-HOA will assist in developing CA teams for the military of the Republic of Somalia.

In 2009 the DOD and AFRICOM decided to keep the CJTF-HOA because of its strategic location, and by 2012 3,500 troops and representatives from 14 countries were stationed there. The CJTF-HOA allowed the United States to respond to contingencies within the Horn, supplied in-theater personnel for AFRICOM, and provided additional resources to embassies in the region. The task force had demonstrated that it could build relationships and goodwill with officials where CA and other activities were held. Lastly, the task force was positioned to counteract regional terrorist threats, as noted in its mission statement:

The mission of CJTF-HOA involves an indirect approach to counter violent extremism. CJTF-HOA, as part of US African Command (AFRICOM), conducts operations to strengthen partner nation and regional security capacity to enable long-term regional stability, prevent conflict and protect US and Coalition interests. CJTF-HOA builds friendships, forges relationships, and creates partnerships to enable African solutions to African challenges. CJTF-HOA aims, through its combined joint forces, to improve security, increase stability and strengthen sovereignty in the Horn of Africa and Eastern Africa region through being a model for the integration of Defense, Diplomacy and Development efforts.<sup>22</sup>

In comparison with the DOS's approach of trying to reconstitute the state in Somalia, the US military's attempts to win hearts and minds and build partnerships in the Horn of Africa do not appear to have had a strategic effect in advancing US interests against the violent extremist threat. The DOS has been accused of being too diffuse in its approach to security challenges while the DOD has been more focused. In this case, the DOS—particularly the US Embassy in Nairobi—concentrated on defeating the main threat; the DOD and CJTF-HOA did not.

## Conclusion

The US military in the form of AFRICOM and the CJTF-HOA has encountered difficulties in embracing strategic knowledge and perspective in its overall approach to countering violent extremism. The US military's mistakes that were made by CA teams in Kenya and Ethiopia revealed a deficiency in strategic knowledge and perspective in assisting with sustainable development and winning hearts and minds.

With the help of the Obama administration, the State Department, and USAID, the military has adjusted its role and is a subordinate actor in the sustainable development field. However, the military still experiences difficulties in designing and executing activities and modifying them over the years. It continues to lack sufficient strategic knowledge and perspective to meet the challenges of the Horn.

The constant rotation of CJTF-HOA commanders and the swings between active and passive commanders have upheld the thesis from contingency theory that the organization has not been as effective as it should have been. The longer tenure of leaders in the embassies (and defense offices) has been accompanied by greater strategic knowledge and perspective in dealing with the Eastern African region—specifically Somalia (and Sudan / South Sudan) and security issues in the region. In regard to organizational learning, the CJTF-HOA and its CA teams rotate every year or less while diplomacy, development, and defense officials in the US embassies do so every three years. The hypothesis that unstable organizations with constantly rotating leaders are not as capable of learning has been upheld and applies to the US military in the Horn of Africa. In contrast, relatively stable and mature organizations—such as the embassies—with accountable leaders are better able to learn and change in an ambiguous environment.

Any explanation of the US military's shortcomings in embracing strategic knowledge and perspective in the Horn of Africa and fighting extremists must consider casualty aversion as a significant factor. The DOD has been reluctant to commit to any program or project that might lead to a repeat of the "Black Hawk down" experience. Iraq and Afghanistan seemed to end casualty aversion; however, the fundamental problem has stemmed from Black Hawk down 20 years ago and the DOD's reluctance to engage in the stabilization of Somalia, as evidenced by a lack of engagement with AMISOM and the TFG.

The hypothesis that the US military likely will seek out roles and missions—no matter how detached from strategy-producing "mission creep"—has been upheld in this case. This is not mission creep in regard to escalating force but expanding the mission into areas of little strategic knowledge and perspective in order to keep the task force actively engaged.

The different perspectives of the embassies, the CJTF-HOA, and AFRICOM are indicative of the stovepipe (narrow) vision of US agencies. At times and for some, it appeared that the larger strategic aims established by the United States in Africa got lost in the tactical and operational shuffle. The same has applied to Southwest Asia, especially in countering al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab, and other violent extremist organizations. Evaluation

of the US military in the Horn of Africa indicates that the United States could do other things with hundreds of millions of dollars to combat violent extremism instead of continuing to fund the CJTF-HOA's CA teams.

## Notes

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