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Hidden History: America's Secret Drone War in Africa

- By [David Axe](#)
- Email Author
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An MQ-9 Reaper in Iraq in 2008. *Photo: Air Force*

More secret bases. More and better unmanned warplanes. More frequent and deadly robotic attacks. Some five years after a U.S. Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle flew the type's first mission over lawless Somalia, the shadowy American-led drone campaign in the Horn of Africa is targeting Islamic militants more ruthlessly than ever.

Thanks to media accounts, indirect official statements, fragmentary crash reports and one complaint by a U.N. monitoring group, we can finally begin to define — however vaguely — the scope and scale of the secret African drone war.

The details that follow are in part conjecture, albeit *informed* conjecture. They outline of just [one of America's ongoing shadow wars](#) — and one possible model for the future U.S. way of war. Along with the counterterrorism campaigns in Pakistan, Yemen and the Philippines, the Somalia drone war demonstrates how high-tech U.S. forces can inflict major damage on America's enemies at relatively low cost ... and without most U.S. citizens having any idea it's even happening.

Since 2007, Predator drones and the larger, more powerful Reapers — reinforced by Ravens and Scan Eagle UAVs and Fire Scout robot helicopters plus a small number of huge, high-flying Global Hawks — have hunted Somali jihadists on scores of occasions. It's [part of a broader campaign](#) of jet bombing runs, [naval gun bombardment](#), cruise-missile attacks, raids by Special Operations Forces and [assistance to regional armies such as Uganda's](#).

In all, air raids by manned and unmanned U.S. aircraft [have killed at least 112 Somali militants](#), according to a count by the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism. Fifty-seven innocent civilians also died in the raids, the nonprofit Bureau found. The dead jihadists have included [several senior members of al-Qaeda or the affiliated al-Shabaab extremist group](#). In January, a drone launched three Hellfire missiles at a convoy near Mogadishu and [killed Bilaal al-Barjawi](#), the mastermind of the 2010 bombing in Kampala, Uganda, [that claimed the lives of 74 soccer fans](#).

In an escalating secret war, drones are doing an ever-greater proportion of the American fighting.



A Scan Eagle drone launches from a Navy ship in the Middle East. *Photo: Navy*

The Drones Are Coming

It wasn't until relatively recently that U.S. drones were permanently stationed in East Africa. The military and CIA have operated armed versions of General Atomics' one-ton Predator since 2001, but early on the remote-controlled warplanes were in high demand and short supply. Afghanistan and later Iraq monopolized the drones.

That was a big problem for the small U.S. force in East Africa struggling to keep tabs on increasingly radical, and dangerous, Somali militants. "The largest gap is knowledge," Navy Rear Adm. Tony Kurta, former commander of U.S. troops in Djibouti, told Danger Room in 2009.

In 2003, Joint Special Operations Command resorted to spending six months sneaking SEALs into Somalia by submarine to painstakingly plant disguised surveillance cameras — all to capture just a fraction of the images a drone could acquire in a single mission.

"If we're having to go to that extreme, it's because we lack other capabilities because they're drawn elsewhere," [a senior intelligence official told *Army Times*' ace reporter](#)

[Sean Naylor](#). "Instead of doing it like that, you'd want to have more Predators."

The drone shortage represented a huge risk for CIA agents attempting to build an intelligence network for tracking suspected terrorists in Somalia. The agency used cash payments to Somali warlords as a "carrot" to draw them to the American side. U.S. air power was supposed to be the "stick" that helped motivate the Somalis. But for years the intel agency didn't actually possess any stick. So it lied, telling the warlords there were drones overhead when in fact there weren't.

[It was risky bluff](#). "But it worked," an intelligence official told Naylor.

It took a surprise — [and ultimately doomed](#) — invasion of Somalia by regional power Ethiopia to open the door for a stronger U.S. presence in East Africa. American commandos followed along [behind the Ethiopian tank columns](#) as side-firing AC-130 gunships provided lethal top cover.

Where once the small U.S. force in East Africa had relied mostly on a single large base in Djibouti, just north of Somalia, in the wake of the Ethiopian blitz [American bases sprouted across the region](#). The CIA and American security contractors set up shop alongside a U.N.-backed peacekeeping force at the shell-crated international airport in Mogadishu. [American contractors quietly carved a secret airstrip out of a forest](#) in Arba Minch, Ethiopia. Under the guise of tracking Somali pirates, the Pentagon negotiated permission to base people and planes on the Indian Ocean island nation of the Seychelles.

Soon all these bases would support drone aircraft being churned out at an accelerating rate by the U.S. aerospace industry. In 2003 the U.S. military possessed only a handful of Pioneer, Predator and other drones. After spending around \$5 billion annually, year after year, by 2012 America's robotic arsenal had swelled to [678 large and medium drones](#) and no fewer than [3,000 small, hand-launched Ravens](#).

Some of each were destined for Somalia, where the CIA and Pentagon were advancing plans for a far-reaching, but subtle, campaign to defeat militants and prop up a fledgling, U.N.-backed government. It was a campaign that, in stark contrast to the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, would not include any large, permanent American ground forces. American CIA agents, mercenaries, commandos and drones would provide intelligence, training, raiding prowess and air cover while Ethiopian, Ugandan and Kenyan troops did most of the day-to-day fighting inside Somalia.



An MQ-1 Predator armed with Hellfire missiles flies over southern Afghanistan. *Photo: Air Force*

Opening Salvo

On Jan. 7, 2007, a Predator took off from an American base in Africa — all evidence suggests it was Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. Command of the aircraft was then transferred to a two-person crew, most likely sitting in a trailer in Nevada. The Predator cruised the roughly 500 miles to the southern Somali town of Ras Kamboni. Following coordinates provided by Ethiopian intelligence, the Predator used its high-fidelity video camera to track a convoy of vehicles transporting Aden Hashi Farah, one of Somalia's top Al Qaeda operatives. Farah had trained in Afghanistan and returned to Somalia where he led the kidnapping and murder of aid workers.

The Predator was unarmed, possibly to save weight for its long-distance flight. So an AC-130 gunship fitted with cannons and machine guns [opened fire, smashing the convoy](#). Farah was wounded but survived: [he would be killed a year later in another U.S. air strike](#). While it failed to take out the primary target, the Ras Kamboni raid was the opening shot in the East African drone war. Subsequent robot-led attacks would be much more successful for the Americans.

The drones came by land and by sea. Besides Camp Lemonnier, Predators and Reapers operated by the Air Force (and possibly the CIA) [deployed to the Seychelles](#) and Ethiopia for flights over the Somalia. It's been difficult to verify exactly how many drones are present at each base, but Predators and Reapers normally deploy in groups of three or four known as "orbits," each staffed by around 75 people who launch, land, arm and repair the 'bots. If all three major *known* African UAV bases have single orbits, the robot force structure in the region could include as many as 12 Predators and Reapers at a time.

At around the same time the larger drones were settling in, American agents, commandos or contractors in Mogadishu — it's not clear who, exactly — received an unknown number of five-pound, hand-launched Ravens from manufacturer AeroVironment. The simple, camera-equipped Ravens were ideal for short-range surveillance flights during the urban battles aimed at liberating Mogadishu from militants. In 2011 Washington approved a [\\$45-million package of arms and training](#) to Ugandan peacekeepers in the city that included another four Ravens.

Meanwhile Navy ships sailing off the Somali coast began carrying catapult-launched Scan Eagles manufactured by Boeing and Insitu as well as [Northrop Grumman's vertical-takeoff Fire Scout robo-copters](#). The Fire Scouts initially helped in Navy counter-piracy efforts, but by 2011 had shifted to "overland intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance ... for Special Operations Forces," [according to a recent Navy story](#). The sailing branch also deployed one of its five RQ-4 Global Hawks — Northrop-built spy drones with the wingspan of a 737 airliner — to an unspecified Indian Ocean base to, among other duties, [provide air cover for the 5th Fleet](#) off the Somali coast. And although unmentioned in press reports, Air Force Global Hawks are also theoretically available for Somalia patrols from their forward base in the United Arab Emirates.

The Ethiopians occupied Somalia for three bloody years then retreated, leaving behind a mostly Ugandan peacekeeping force that gradually fought its way out of its Mogadishu strongholds, finally recapturing the city this year. In late 2011 the Kenyans [invaded in Somalia's south](#). American support steadily expanded in concert with the Ugandan-Kenyan attacks. The pace of U.S. drone flights increased commensurately.

"The number of reports concerning the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Somalia in 2011-12 has increased," the U.N. Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported in late June. The group said it tracked 64 unidentified military aircraft over Somalia, including drones, in the 11 months between June 2011 and April this year. There were surely many more flights the U.N. observers did not see.

How many? It's possible to make an educated guess.

In 2009 Air Force Gen. John Corley, then chief of Air Combat Command, said that [95 percent of his branch's UAV sorties were focused on "Southwest Asia,"](#) which to the Pentagon means Iraq and Afghanistan. Let's say just half of the remaining five percent of flights occurred in the Pentagon's *other* major drone battleground, Somalia. Since

2007 the Air Force's Predators and Reapers, today numbering around 300, have flown [nearly a million flight hours](#). By our reckoning, the percentage that may have occurred over East Africa — some 25,000 hours over five years — equates to around 12 hours of robot flight time per day. And that's assuming the proportion of drone flights devoted to Somalia hasn't increased lately, which in fact it most certainly has.

Conservatively speaking, it's possible at least one Predator or Reaper drone has been airborne over Somalia half the day, every day since the first Predator took off from Camp Lemonnier in 2007. Flights by Global Hawks, Fire Scouts, Scan Eagles and Ravens adds to this persistent robot presence.

For the first four years the aerial robots played a strictly supporting role, surveilling and tracking targets for Special Operations Forces, gunship attacks, F-15 bombing runs, helicopter raids and cruise-missile strikes. When the Predators and Reapers began using their own weapons is unclear. The first *verifiable* drone attack occurred on June 23, 2011, after which the robotic strikes occurred in rapid-fire fashion. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism counted as many as nine confirmed drone attacks between June 2011 and today.

Again, the *actual* number of strikes is undoubtedly higher. If a robotic strike occurs out of sight of reporters or their sources, it remains secret.



An MQ-8 Fire Scout robot helicopter lands aboard the Navy frigate USS Simpson off the African coast this year. Photo: Navy

Telltale Signs

The military rarely confirms drone operations over Somalia — and the CIA *never* does. This reporter actually witnessed what appeared to be a Predator takeoff from Camp Lemonnier in 2009 while waiting to board the destroyer USS *Donald Cook* to cover a counter-piracy mission. The robot launch was just part of the flurry of warplane activity I observed over the bustling base. Leaving aside from that fleeting firsthand sighting, the best evidence of America's African drone war is left by the pilotless warplanes themselves ... when they crash, or nearly crash. The sheer number of flying robots tumbling out of the sky over Somalia seems to indicate much more intensive UAV operations than official and press reports imply.

Some of the first evidence of *any* U.S. drone activity in Somalia came in March 2008, when what appeared to be a ship-launched UAV tumbled into the sea near Merka, then a hotly-contested town in militant-dominated southern Somalia. "[It's small and can be carried by three people](#)," local government official Mohamed Mohamoud Helmi said of the winged object his constituents dragged from the water. The description roughly matches the 40-pound Scan Eagle that the Navy uses to shoot video just over the horizon from its ships.

After the apparent Scan Eagle incident, drones began falling from the heavens like zapped insects. On May 13, 2009, a Predator was destroyed following an incident at what Air Force investigators described as a "[forward operating location](#)." It probably wasn't Iraq or Afghanistan, as those countries are usually named in crash reports. Nor was the location likely to be Pakistan, as drones there are generally understood to be the CIA's responsibility. By process of elimination, it seems the 2009 crash was in East Africa.

2010 seems to have been a pretty safe years for American UAVs over Somalia. But [in 2011 Predators crashed](#) near Camp Lemonnier on Jan. 14, March 15, May 7 and May 17. A Reaper [plunged into the ground](#) in the Seychelles on Dec. 13, 2011, and another [crash-landed on the island nation](#) on April 4 this year. Unidentified drones, possibly Ravens, lost their power of flight in Mogadishu on [Aug. 19, 2011](#) and [Feb. 3](#) this year.

While not crashes *per se*, twice drones have nearly caused serious accidents in Mogadishu, as pointed out by the U.N. monitoring group in its [rather defensively-toned report](#). Last November 13, a Raven flew over a delicate U.N. fuel depot, alarming the world body's personnel on the ground who were fearful of a crash, the group claimed. And on Jan. 9 a 737 carrying Ugandan peacekeepers "almost collided with an (sic) UAV" on takeoff from the Mogadishu airport.

The crash reports match the apparent pattern of America's secret East African drone flights: sporadic in the early years, steadily increasing before reaching a fever pitch in 2011 and 2012.

The crashes also seem to corroborate our guess at the overall number of drone flight hours in the region. Recently Predators have crashed at a rate of [just over seven per 100,000 flight hours](#). Reapers crash roughly twice as often. Since 2009 the Air Force alone has lost at least four and probably five Predators plus two Reapers in East Africa, indicating these 'bots flew *at least* the 25,000 hours we surmise from indirect Air Force statements.



A Ugandan soldier in Mogadishu. *Photo: U.N.*

Robot Effect

From the evidence we can roughly outline the history of America's secret drone war in Africa. But is the robotic campaign against Somalia's Islamic militants working? That's a much harder question to answer.

To be sure, the militant threat in Somalia is hard to dispute, especially with the homegrown al-Shabaab group openly aligning itself with al-Qaeda and [pulling off more](#)

[international attacks](#). “In Somalia, it is indeed worrying to witness al-Qaeda’s merger with al-Shabaab, whose ranks include foreign fighters, some with U.S. passports,” John Brennan, Pres. Barack Obama’s top counterterrorism official, said in [a rare public speech in April](#).

Brennan singled out drones as one of the best weapons in the fight against these terrorists. “Remotely piloted aircraft in particular can be a wise choice because of geography, with their ability to fly hundreds of miles over the most treacherous terrain, strike their targets with astonishing precision, and then return to base,” he said. “It’s this surgical precision — the ability, with laser-like focus, to eliminate the cancerous tumor called an al-Qaeda terrorist while limiting damage to the tissue around it — that makes this counterterrorism tool so essential.”

But some skeptics point to popular backlash against drone strikes as evidence the robots are doing more harm than good. In Pakistan, especially, public resentment over American UAV attacks could fuel, rather than suppress, militant sentiment ... and have the unintended effect of driving young men into the arms of extremist groups. Would-be Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad, for instance, said the drone strikes [helped motivate him to carry out his attack](#).

In other countries, however, attitudes might be different. This spring, University of Virginia researcher Chris Swift spent a week interviewing tribal leaders in southern Yemen, [another target-rich zone for U.S. drones](#). Swift found that war-weary rural populations were ambivalent about robot strikes. “Nobody in my cohort [of interview subjects] [drew a causal link](#) between drones on one hand and [militant] recruiting on other,” Swift said.

Somalia is not Yemen, but it’s more similar to Yemen than it is to Pakistan. Famed war reporter Robert Young Pelton, writing for his SomaliaReport online journal, “found most of the people we interviewed in Mogadishu [to be favorable to the concept](#)” of the drone war. “Keeping in mind,” he added, “this is a city in which thousands have been killed by indiscriminate shelling and gunfire.”

To be sure, not every Somali is so supportive of American air attacks in general. During my visit to Mogadishu in late 2007, a middle-aged school teacher pulled me aside. “You Americans,” the man scolded, “you’ll destroy an entire city to get three people.”

Still, the absence *so far* of popular backlash against America’s shadowy robot campaign in Africa should be encouraging news for U.S. policymakers. With the war in Iraq over and major combat ops in Afghanistan rapidly drawing to a close, America is entering a new era of warfare, one in which *most* U.S. conflicts could be waged in the shadows by intelligence agents, commandos and high-tech robotic aircraft — some merely spies, others armed and primed to kill.