

## US interventions in East Africa: from the Cold War to the 'war on terror'

[Amrit Wilson](#) [1] 18 November 2013

*During the Cold War years, while British colonialists were being driven out of East Africa, the first US intervention in the region occurred in Zanzibar. It proved to be a model - many aspects of which are being repeated in the 'War on Terror'.*

In Britain, the attack on the upmarket Westgate shopping mall in Kenya in which 130 people lost their lives, is rapidly fading from public memory, already ascribed to just another act of 'mindless violence' perpetrated by Islamic terrorists.

But many Kenyans see things differently. Some regard it as the result of Kenya's [involvement](#) [8] in a proxy war being fought in Somalia on behalf of Europe. Others highlight Israeli or American involvement. The facts support these analyses: the EU provides [124 million euros](#) [9] for peacekeepers in Somalia; a recent [Israeli arms deal](#) [10] with Kenya specifically mentioned fighting Al Shabaab; and as for America, its role is an overarching one, in the [words](#) [11] of the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, it 'leverages local and indigenous forces [for use] ...aggressively and surgically in Africa and the Arabian peninsula... in close coordination with, and in support of, geographic combatant commander and U.S. embassy country team requirements'.

What were the paths which led from the struggles against British colonialism in East Africa in the 50s and 60s to what have been called today's new colonial wars? In my recent book, [The Threat of Liberation: Imperialism and Revolution in Zanzibar](#) [12], I explore this question for a small segment of the vast and diverse region of East Africa, Zanzibar. I focus particularly on the first US intervention in the region which occurred during the Cold War, looking at it partly through the experiences and memories of the members of the Marxist Umma party. Although unique in many ways, those experiences still provide a microcosm of the mechanisms through which imperialism operated, and to an extent still operates. They remind us also that a different future was, and perhaps still is, possible.

Zanzibar had been a British protectorate with a population of mixed African and Arab heritage, ruled by a feudal Sultan on a wage from the colonialists. The British had done everything possible to engender ethnic tension, and when in 1963 they finally departed, they transferred power to a party representing the Sultan and his allies. Within months the Zanzibar revolution, the first revolution against neocolonialism in Africa, had swept the islands. Initially a spontaneous uprising mainly by African youth, the involvement of the multi-ethnic Umma party transformed it into a revolutionary insurrection where Arabs and Africans stood together against the neocolonial rulers. As Abdulrahman Babu leader of the Umma Party put it, the people

rose up 'not simply to overthrow a politically bankrupt government and a caricature monarchy. They revolted in order to change the social system which had oppressed them and for once to take the destiny of their history into their own hands...It aroused hopes far beyond those of the revolutionaries themselves'..

Declassified documents of the period show that it was these hopes of the people, and the possibility of both political and economic liberation, which US and British officials in Zanzibar and other East African countries found most disturbing. They dispatched a hurricane of messages to Washington, about the fate of a NASA tracking station set up on the islands to keep an eye on the Indian Ocean, about the revolution being a 'coup' instigated and armed by the 'ChiComs' (although they could find no actual evidence of Chinese involvement), about the youth of Zanzibar who had been 'drilling and training in what can only be described as a militant manner' and much else.

Panicking, the US State Department moved a battleship several times to and from the shores of Zanzibar, and urged the British to invade. In the next few weeks, however, they began to formulate a longer term 'Zanzibar Action Plan'. Under this, US officials would work on those Zanzibari leaders they thought they could manipulate to ask for a British military intervention, and so make an invasion look like an African initiative. Meanwhile, the CIA, anxious that Zanzibar might become a 'Cuba of Africa from which sedition would spread to the continent', began to plan an Africa-wide strategy. This involved bringing the countries of Central and East Africa under their control to prevent socialist influences from the countries of North Africa reaching Southern Africa with its host of western investments. It required, most urgently, the 'neutralisation' of socialist influence in Zanzibar.

Eventually this was done, not by military conquest, but through subterfuge, bribery and illegal means. A new country Tanzania was created by uniting Zanzibar and Tanganyika, with the connivance of the leaders of Kenya and Uganda, and presided over by Tanganyika's President Julius Nyerere. In the days that followed, William Leonhart, the US Ambassador in Tanzania, cabled Washington reporting that 'Nyerere's United Republic has given us the initial political framework with which we can work' and urging the US State Department to give Nyerere 'the maximum quiet support from the beginning'. The US Ambassador to Kenya noted, meanwhile, that the laws of Tanganyika 'would become supreme throughout', adding that 'the [colonial] Preventative Detention Act could be used to round up radicals in Zanzibar'.

This was indeed what happened. While Zanzibar was almost powerless within the Union, bound to what had been Tanganyika in a semi-colonial relationship, hundreds of Umma party members and sympathisers and others who were seen as critics, or potential critics of the regime in Zanzibar, were arrested and locked up. Torture chambers were established on the main island where men, women, and even children,

were brutally tortured. Many were killed.

Nyerere, who had become an object of love and high regard for Western liberals, said and did nothing to stem the horrific violence. Babu and several other leaders of the Umma party were incarcerated in mainland Tanganyika, and charged with treason. They remained there for six years in appalling conditions, until they were released following a powerful international campaign.

The US intervention into Zanzibar and its aftermath brought economic decline to the islands, but people were not much better off in mainland Tanzania. The Revolutionary government of Zanzibar under Babu's leadership had laid down the blueprint for an independent economy. This involved dismantling the colonial economy, based as it was on production for export, and replacing it with an economy geared to meeting the people's essential needs while at the same time creating a domestic market. But these plans were forgotten. Under Nyerere, Tanzania which had once been the largest food exporter in Africa, became one of the poorest countries in the world - dependent on food aid from the West.

In the mid-1980s, under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank, the government, now under Nyerere's successors, embarked on economic liberalisation. Since then the country has sunk deeper into US domination. Much of mainland Tanzania's resources, precious metals and minerals have been sold off to the robber barons of global capital, while its fertile agricultural land has been leased off to corporates for growing biofuels and food for export.

This pattern of corporate land grabs was, of course, taking place all over East Africa. In the 1980s, in Somalia, then under the pro-US President Siad Barre, nearly two-thirds of the country's oil reserves were allocated to the American petroleum giants Conoco, Amoco, Chevron and Phillips. After Barre was overthrown, the US invaded Somalia primarily to protect these investments. It was one of the markers of a new period, when with the fall of the Soviet Union, the US, suddenly bereft of an enemy, created and targeted a new one – Islamic terrorism. Done in the name of 'humanitarian intervention', it was in fact the launch of the 'war on terror' in the region.

In Somalia today the US and Britain, with the help of their many proxy fighters and 'peacekeepers' claim to be fighting Al-Shabaab. Tomorrow, it could be a different terrorist group or a different country which is targeted. In Africa, as elsewhere, the 'war on terror' can always find 'terrorists' to fight - they could be ordinary people going about their business which happens to stand in the way of corporate loot, or groups which grow under the shadow of imperialism generated by people's anger against its injustices, or encouraged and created by imperialism itself .

What is common to all recent American interventions, however, is that they occur in regions rich in resources. Contemporary US cables revealed by WikiLeaks clarify this

link between the 'War on Terror' and America's hunger for African land and its oil, gas and minerals. They provide some clues too about the regional context for the evolution of AFRICOM, the highly sophisticated US military command in Africa, which claims, among other things, to protect the continent from terrorism.

We learn, for example, that in 2006, (at a time when the US military were already entrenched in Africa) the government of Tanzania had agreed to the establishment of a 'Civil Affairs presence' in Zanzibar by the US Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa. This 'Civil Affairs team (which we have rebranded as "AFRICOM")', the cables tell us some three years later, is carrying out 'humanitarian' operations and helping build 'Civil Military Operations (CMOs)... capacity within the Tanzania Peoples Defense Forces'.

What are CMOs? The US army provides us with an explanation. They are 'a primary military instrument to synchronize military and nonmilitary instruments of national power'. Their work includes surveillance, abduction, rendition and torture, providing bases for drone aircraft and similar operations. Only now it is to be done by the Tanzanian army, thanks to capacity building by AFRICOM .

CMOs deal, the document goes on, with 'potential challenges' such as ethnic and religious conflict, cultural and socioeconomic differences, terrorism and insurgencies, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and most significantly perhaps - the '*sharpening competition/exploitation of dwindling natural resources* [my italics]'. In other words they can, where necessary, provide military force to secure the resources that the US wants from Africa.

As for the 'sharpening competition', other contemporary cables make it clear that this is a reference to America's old Cold War enemy, China. While in the 60s, the US worried about Chinese arms and influence, today it is concerned about its burgeoning imports from, and exports to, the countries of Africa. Chinese strategy in Africa today is very different from that of the US, it has been willing to obtain its resources through trade, providing light industrial goods in return for raw materials; and building and developing infrastructure – railways and bridges, for example, to facilitate this process.

China's increasing presence in Africa is, in fact, one of the strategic reasons behind the setting up of AFRICOM. One AFRICOM study even claiming with a touch of Cold War hysteria that 'The extrapolation of history predicts that distrust and uncertainty will inevitably lead the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to Africa in staggering numbers'.

However, US diplomatic messages make it clear, through reports on private conversations, conference briefings, and personal assessments, that the structures of imperialist exploitation have changed. Corporates are far more powerful, and in this

neoliberal era, they thrive on both the expropriation of resources and the 'war on terror'. Currently, American troops are being deployed in [35 African countries](#) [13]. In every case there are huge profits to be made, not only from the resources taken over, but from the sale of weapons, training and armaments of all kinds.

It is ultimately on behalf of big business too, as US cables show, that teams of US and EU officials, supported by donors, have been putting pressure on the politicians of Zanzibar to provide the 'stable' infrastructures which would make the potentially lucrative oil deposits, found in the waters of the islands not long ago, accessible. And if this requires Zanzibar to leave the Union with mainland Tanzania - so be it.

As for AFRICOM, it is mainly in East Africa that relations with it have been welcomed. In 2007, the Southern Africa Development Community, made up of 14 African countries, [openly denounced it](#) [14]; and in 2008, the African Union [categorically rejected](#) [15] President Bush's plan for AFRICOM to be based in Africa. But in East Africa, leaders such as Tanzania's President Jakaya Kikwete and intra-government organisations like the East African Community, have been ready to provide the political framework for US military penetration - eagerly signing Memoranda of Understanding on joint military cooperation on 'counterinsurgency, peace-building and peace keeping, with operations on both land and sea.'

However, despite their leaders compliance, in East Africa too, people are angry that Africans are being killed fighting wars with other Africans on behalf of the west. People's resistance to imperialism is growing through anti-land grab movements and in struggles against giant mining companies. With the fiftieth anniversary of the Zanzibar revolution approaching, people's anger against the surrogates of imperialism on the islands is palpable. Will Zanzibar prevent its oil being taken over by foreign oil companies? Will it be able to use it to transform the acute poverty which stalks the islands? These are the questions which hang in the balance.

*[The Threat of Liberation: Imperialism and Revolution in Zanzibar](#) [12] is published by Pluto Books*

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While the "war on terrorism" usually relates to internationally linked terrorists, Africans face other security threats of equal or greater significance, posing a question of focus for American as well as African counterterrorism efforts. There are several organized rebellions or insurgencies in Africa, while not always classified as terrorists, which wreak terrible havoc on African people and threaten national stability. The Horn of Africa is Africa's bridge to the Middle East. That fact explains much about the complex interrelationships between differing Islamic cultures within Africa, from east to west. During the Cold War years, while British colonialists were being driven out of East Africa, the first US intervention in the region occurred in Zanzibar. It proved to be a model - many aspects of which are being repeated in the 'War on Terror'. Amrit Wilson. 18 November 2013. Contemporary US cables revealed by WikiLeaks clarify this link between the 'War on Terror' and America's hunger for African land and its oil, gas and minerals. They provide some clues too about the regional context for the evolution of AFRICOM, the highly sophisticated US military command in Africa, which claims, among other things, to protect the continent from terrorism. The question is a contentious one, as there has been no formal accounting for the deadly cost of the initial U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the secondary conflicts that continue to wreak havoc across the Middle East and the opaque, covert war still expanding across Asia and Africa. But even as the U.S. government evades responsibility for the human cost of its overseas endeavors, some researchers are determined to keep count. The study also focuses on only the three countries where the United States launched its so-called war on terror. If the conflicts in Libya, Yemen, Somalia, or Syria where the U.S. has conducted major military operations in recent years had been included, the death toll would likely be significantly higher. The USA, the Soviet Union, China, Foreign Intervention in Africa chronicles the foreign political and military interventions in Africa from 1956 to 2010, during the periods of decolonisation and the Cold War, as well as during the periods of state collapse and the 'global war on terror'. In the first two periods, the most significant intervention was extra-continental. The global war on terror, like the Cold War, increased foreign military presence on the African continent and generated external support for repressive governments. In each of these cases, external interests altered the dynamics of Africa's internal struggles, escalating local conflicts into larger conflagrations, with devastating effects on African peoples. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon. An examination of Cold War theories, global "war on terror" practices, and the interplay between the two illuminates the ideological and structural checks that vex geopolitical order in this new century. Realist Roots and Contemporary Confusion. American foreign policy in the Middle East, the most fragile geopolitical flashpoint of the day, dates back to the Cold War. From Cold War to Hot Mess. Cold War thinking has carried over and clouded America's contemporary global "war on terror" practices. Brands of realism, the oldest paradigmatic approach to international relations, drove American foreign policy debates during its fifty-year-long Cold War with the Soviets.