

US special operations soldier killed, four others wounded in Somalia

By Bill Van Auken
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A US special operations soldier was killed and four other troops wounded last Friday during combat operations against the al-Shabaab Islamist militia in Somalia.

Army Sergeant Alexander Conrad, 26, was the second member of the US military to die in the impoverished African nation in little more than a year. A US Navy Seal was killed in May 2017, the first US combat death in Somalia since the 1993 “Black Hawk Down” debacle in Mogadishu in which Somali militiamen shot down two American helicopters, claiming the lives of 18 soldiers and prompting the Clinton administration to withdraw US military forces from the country.

The US troops killed and wounded last week were reportedly part of a force of some 800 soldiers, including both Somali and Kenyan troops, conducting a multi-day operation about 350 kilometers south of Mogadishu near the Kenyan border.

The US military intervention in Somalia, conducted under the pretext of the “war on terror,” has been significantly escalated under the Trump administration. There are now at least 500 US troops deployed in the country—a tenfold increase over 2016. With the lifting of restrictions ostensibly meant to limit civilian casualties, US airstrikes have also steadily increased, with 48 carried out since January 2017, compared with just 14 in 2016 and 11 in 2015.

Somalia is one of the hottest wars being carried out by the Pentagon’s Africa Command (AFRICOM), which has 7,000 troops on the continent, with contingents deployed in 50 out of Africa’s 54 countries and US troops involved in combat in 20 of them.

These shadow wars, carried out behind the backs of the American people and with little knowledge even of the US Congress, were brought to public attention last

October with the killing of four American special operations troops who were ambushed while on a search-and-kill mission in Niger.

The US military operates in Somalia together with a 22,000-strong African Union “peacekeeping” force as well as the Somali National Security Forces.

Just days before the report of American casualties, US President Donald Trump issued a letter to Congress that described US operations in Somalia. “United States Armed Forces continue to counter the terrorist threat posed by ISIS and al-Shabaab, an associated force of al-Qa’ida,” it stated. “Since the last periodic report, United States forces have conducted a number of airstrikes against al-Shabaab. United States military personnel also advise, assist, and accompany regional forces, including Somali and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces, during counterterrorism operations.”

With both the Somali government and the AMISOM forces proving largely ineffective, it is apparent that US forces are increasingly taking the lead in these operations, and that the Pentagon is laying the groundwork for a permanent military presence in Somalia with the construction of new base facilities.

The claim that the US intervention is driven by al-Shabaab’s supposedly close connections with Al Qaeda and the threat it poses to US security is not supported by the facts. There is no evidence that Al Qaeda plays any significant role in Somalia, and there have been no terrorist attacks attributed to al-Shabaab in either the United States or Europe.

The commander of AFRICOM, Marine General Thomas Waldhauser, acknowledged as much in a statement on US strategy in the country issued Saturday in response to the US casualties: “Simply put, we’re working to prevent atrocious acts before they

come to fruition.”

US imperialism has long sought to dominate Somalia because of its strategic location on the Horn of Africa, the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden and the mouth of the Red Sea, through which most of Europe and Asia’s maritime trade, worth about \$700 billion a year, passes.

In 1991, Washington withdrew its support from the Somalia’s longtime strongman Siad Barre, leading to the collapse of his regime. The Clinton administration then seized upon a famine in the country to launch a “humanitarian” intervention in 1993, sending in 30,000 troops, who were withdrawn after the “Blackhawk down” debacle.

The US never ceded its interests in the region, however, setting up a major base in neighboring Djibouti in the wake 9/11, and sending in military “advisers” to direct an Ethiopian invasion in 2006 that toppled the Islamic Courts government, a moderate Islamist regime that had ousted the US puppet Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Al-Shabaab emerged as an independent movement out of the death and destruction caused by the Ethiopian invasion orchestrated by Washington.

While discussions are reportedly underway on reducing the forces allocated to AFRICOM’s operations as part of the Pentagon’s shift toward a strategy directed at preparing for “great power” conflicts with nuclear-armed Russia and China, this shift is not expected to diminish US involvement in Somalia.

American interests in dominating the country have only intensified in the face of China’s establishing its first overseas military base in neighboring Djibouti, an extension of its expanding economic influence on the African continent.

Meanwhile, Somalia has also become an arena for sharpening conflicts between regional powers, with Turkey assuming a major economic and political role, while setting up its own military base outside of Mogadishu.

The United Arab Emirates is also playing a major role in the country, funding security forces and developing Somaliland’s strategic Red Sea port of Berbera.

Turkey has opposed the attempts of Saudi Arabia and UAE to impose a blockade against Qatar over its

failure to toe Riyadh’s line in relation to the buildup toward military confrontation with Iran.

The US-backed TFG regime of President Mohamed Abdullah Mohamed has claimed it is neutral in this conflict, clearly hoping to continue receiving aid from both sides. The Saudi monarchy, however, sees the regime as too close to Ankara and Qatar.

A report issued last week by the International Crisis Group warned that the regional tensions had “exacerbated divisions” within different elements of the TFG regime receiving money from either Turkey or the Saudi-led Gulf monarchies and had also led to tensions between different elements of the security forces either funded or trained by one or the other of the regional powers.

“If the country becomes a battleground for richer, more powerful states, and they and Somali factions pursue a form of zero-sum competition ill-suited to the country’s factious and multipolar politics, the bloodshed and discord that have long blighted Somalia risk taking an even darker turn,” the report concluded.

The threat is emerging that Somalia will become the arena for the same kind of US-backed bloodbath that is being carried out on the opposite side of the Gulf of Aden in Yemen.

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