

Somali communities targeted by UK 'counter-terror' measures: the need for solidarity

In the mass media Somalia has become a synonym for war, disorder, terrorism and piracy. The country has been a focus for covert US-led 'counter-terror' operations. Even less well known is that many Somalis in the UK have been persecuted under 'anti-terror' powers. Moreover, MI5 has intimidated numerous individuals to act as informers on their community. Such persecution serves the UK's foreign policy aims, especially to establish a client state in Somalia, as this briefing explains.

Many UK citizens and residents were born in Somalia or have ancestors there. With the largest Somali community in Europe, the UK had an estimated 500,000 Somali-born immigrants in 2010. The first Somali migrants in the UK arrived in the 19th century as seamen and merchants. Others came during the Second World War with the Royal Navy. But most Somalis now living here are families who fled from Somali wars since the 1980s. One of the largest Muslim groups in the UK, the Somali community includes notable sports figures, filmmakers, journalists and local politicians. Somalis have also established business networks and media organisations.

Western proxies to control Somalia

Africa's easternmost country, Somalia is a strategic area: its northern coast borders the entry to the Red Sea, and its Indian Ocean coastline is 3000km long. In the 19th century, European colonial powers partitioned the Horn of Africa, leaving the Somali people divided into five states: British protectorate, Italian Somalia, French Somalia (now Djibouti), Northern Frontier District of Kenya and Ogaden in Ethiopia. This led to many military conflicts over decades. Eventually British Somalia and Italian Somalia gained independence and together formed the Somali Republic in 1960.

After a coup against the civilian government in 1969, Major General Siyad Barre ruled Somalia until 1991. After rebels led by General Aideed ousted Barre in 1991, civil war broke out. In the 1991-92 *burba* (catastrophe), over a million of Somalis were killed, 2 million were internally displaced and 3 million of them fled the country.¹ Drought and war caused a famine in which around 250,000 died.

To 'establish peace', a UN peacekeeping force (UNOSOM) arrived, followed in 1993 by US forces. This intervention led to the 'Blackhawk Down' episode in Mogadishu in 1993, when two US helicopters attacked militias, killed many Somalis and were shot down. With 18 US Special Forces dead, the US withdrew its military – but since then has targeted Somalia through proxy forces.

After UNOSOM also left in 1995, regional leaderships gradually established security in some parts of the country. Economic life and justice were restored to some extent but without a central government. Some groups who did this were

Islamists – viewed with hostility not only by the West, but also by Ethiopia, partly due to age-old conflicts. Seeing Somalia as a regional rival, in 1997 the Ethiopian government made a cross-border attack on a Somali militia, *Itihad al Islamiya*.

After Egypt and Ethiopia led rival attempts to broker agreement on a central government among different Somali regional leaderships, in 2000 Ethiopia backed a Transitional National Government. When it increasingly relied on Islamic courts and Islamic charities, however, Ethiopia promoted a rival coalition, the Somali Restoration and Reconciliation Council under Abdullahi Yusuf. After further 'peace-broker' activities by Ethiopia and Kenya, in 2004 Yusuf became president of the 'Transitional Federal Government' (TFG), also backed by the US.

By 2006 the TFG faced a rival authority in the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which provided alternative sources of security and services to the population, in a context where many areas had no effective government authority.² The ICU had significant popular participation, thus impeding Western plans for a client regime.

Backed by the Western powers, Ethiopian forces invaded in December 2006 and ousted the ICU from Mogadishu. US air strikes followed. Then an African Union peacekeeping force (AMISOM) – with mainly Burundian, Ugandan and Kenyan troops – was installed to protect the TFG. Resenting this as Western interference, many Somalis began a military resistance, including *Al Shabaab*, which had broken away from the ICU.

Somalia subjected to 'war on terror'

Since 2001 the Western powers have used AMISOM troops supplied by other African nations as proxies to 'pacify' Somalia. In 2012 the AMISOM force was increased to nearly 18,000 police and troops, along with extra equipment support, thus doubling the UN budget there to \$500m annually; 4,600 Kenyan troops comprise most of the recent increase.³ The Somali coastline has been controlled by Western warships. These interventions seek to impose a client regime.

UK foreign policy is closely linked to US policy; together they portray Somalia as a key theatre for the 'war on terror'.⁴ Through cooperation between Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia, detainees have been subjected to extraordinary rendition and torture; interrogations often have been carried out by Western officials.⁵ From about 2002 onwards the CIA hired Somali warlords to kidnap suspected militants and detain them in secret detention centres. US intelligence authorities reportedly funded these centres, and US personnel have interrogated detainees.⁶

Peaceful, increasingly democratic government (e.g. in Puntland province) shows that Somali-style

bottom-up state-building is possible.⁷ Many Somalis have sought to gain self-determination for their country through a genuinely democratic government accountable to the people.

Yet those efforts have been repeatedly undermined by Western intervention, accommodating foreign business interests in the country's mineral wealth. The UK government stigmatises – as extremists, radicals or terrorists – those who oppose Western interference.

UK Somalis under surveillance

For at least a decade, UK Somali communities have been kept under intensive surveillance by counter-terrorism police. The Home Office's broader 'Prevent' programme identifies threats from 'Islamist radicalisation' and 'violent extremism', especially among youth.⁸ The counter-terrorism strategy targets peaceful political activities, which are suspected 'to provide an environment in which terrorists can operate'.⁹

Like other Muslim and migrant groups, numerous UK Somalis have been stopped at UK ports for questioning. Anyone can be stopped there for up to 9 hours under the Terrorism Act 2000, with no need to demonstrate cause for suspicion.

Through such regular stops, visits to Somalia have been monitored and discouraged. Detainees are asked for information on their own and their acquaintances' political views and religious beliefs.¹⁰ In some cases, questioning pressurises UK Somalis to become informers.¹¹

MI5 intimidation

To recruit informers, MI5 has gone far beyond persuasion or money. People have been harassed in conjunction with house raids, questioning at UK ports and threats of detention. MI5 claims that it does not investigate any group 'on grounds of their ethnicity',¹² yet it has clearly targeted specific migrant groups.

For several years MI5 has intimidated many British Somalis, especially youth workers at the Kentish Town Community Organisation (KTCO). They were threatened with the label 'Islamic extremists' if they refused to become informers. MI5 warned them, 'Work for us or we will say you are a terrorist' to foreign governments. Afterwards MI5 acted on the threat: some were detained as 'terror suspects' and interrogated on trips abroad.¹³

After this practice was exposed, Camden's MP Frank Dobson the Council Leader met Home Office officials to request the end of such harassment. Although illegal, MI5 blackmail continues, remaining unaccountable. According to long-time

civil liberties solicitor Gareth Peirce, 'Hundreds of Somalis under suspicion of travelling to east Africa report that they have been blackmailed and harassed; this a national disgrace'.¹⁴

Revocation of citizenship

A Somali-born UK citizen, Mahdi Hashi, was among the several KTCO care workers who refused to become MI5 informers in 2009. Mahdi in particular felt so harassed that he left the country for Somalia, where he has family members. The Home Secretary revoked his citizenship in October 2012. After leaving Somalia he disappeared and was held at a secret detention site in Djibouti.¹⁵ Later it became public that he was rendered to a New York court, where he was accused of terrorism by supporting *al Shabaab*.¹⁶

By revoking Mahdi's citizenship, the Home Office demonstrated its complicity in the earlier blackmail which led to the decision. As MI5 securocrats build their careers by recruiting informers, they gain cooperation from Home Office chiefs to punish those who refuse. Such revocation has no judicial accountability: 'Legal protection is difficult when the decision is based on secret evidence; this is used as a cover for incompetence, corruption and outright dishonesty', according to Mahdi's solicitor, Saghir Hussain.

This punishment is designed to frighten UK Somalis from engaging with issues affecting their communities here and in Somalia. KTCO community worker Mohamed Nur reported many young people complaining: 'If I show any form of political activism, my UK citizenship might be revoked'.¹⁷

As well as British Somalis, several individuals from other migrant groups have been deprived of their UK citizenship, likewise without due process of law. This executive power has been officially justified as necessary to prevent terrorism, vaguely defined in UK law.¹⁸ After losing their UK citizenship, moreover, some 'terror suspects' have been targeted by drone assassinations in Somalia, Yemen or Pakistan.¹⁹

Conclusion: Solidarity against persecution

In targeting UK Somalis, police and MI5 actions serve a foreign policy aim – namely, to suppress dissent against the West's efforts to establish a client regime in Somalia. Anyone questioning Western intervention there can be easily stigmatised as an 'extremist'. Many Somalis are intimidated to act as informers or are persecuted as 'terror suspects'. To stop those unjust practices, we need to oppose the entire 'counter-terror' framework and build solidarity with Somali communities against their persecution.

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Somalia's political geography



Surrounding countries which have provided Western-proxy invaders or detention sites

Who runs Somalia?



Somalia's fragmentation in 2012²⁰

Further reading

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Notes

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- ³ <http://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/index.php/international/2492-london-conference>
- ⁴ Michael Brenner, The global war on terror's last frontier: Into Africa, 21.06.12, <http://www.cageprisoners.com/learn-more/articles/item/4458-the-global-war-on-terror-s-last-frontier-into-africa>
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- ⁸ Home Office, *National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom: Security in an interdependent world* (2008).
- ⁹ Charles Farr, Director General for Security and Counter-Terrorism, Home Office, 03.10.09 speech.
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- ¹² <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/faqs-about-mi5/does-mi5-spy-on-or-harass-muslims.html>
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- ¹⁵ Djibouti has been a notorious site for extraordinary rendition. See above, Open Society Justice Initiative, p.108.
- ¹⁶ Family are told that former Camden schoolboy is being held in US on 'terror' charges', *Camden New Journal*, 28.12.12, <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/news/2012/dec/fathers-anger-family-are-told-former-camden-schoolboy-being-held-us-terror-charges>
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- ¹⁸ *The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism* (2009).
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