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## Somali Battlegrounds: On Interest and Accountability

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## Somali Battlegrounds: On Interest and Accountability

### Abstract

In the wake of the latest and deadliest of Al-Shabab's attacks in Kenya since Kenyan troops entered Somalia in October 2011, Ben Rawlence reiterates the question raised anew by each attack: "What is Kenya doing in Somalia and is it worth the price?" The question leads him to explore the contradiction between the official objectives of the mission and Kenya's particular motivations to launch an offensive of its own. This problematic discrepancy also draws attention to the question of accountability when violations of international humanitarian law have occurred in the context of a military operation by a neighboring country and to its related implications for the role of the African Union in peacekeeping.

### Keywords

Human rights, Somalia, Kenya, Al-Shabab, African Union

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## **Somali Battlegrounds: On Interest and Accountability**

by Ines Mzali

In the wake of the latest and deadliest of Al-Shabab's attacks in Kenya since Kenyan troops entered Somalia in October 2011, Ben Rawlence reiterates the question raised anew by each attack: "What is Kenya doing in Somalia and is it worth the price?" The question leads him to explore the contradiction between the official objectives of the mission and Kenya's particular motivations to launch an offensive of its own. This problematic discrepancy also draws attention to the question of accountability when violations of international humanitarian law have occurred in the context of a military operation by a neighboring country and to its related implications for the role of the African Union in peacekeeping.

Kenya has been one of the contributing countries to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) since its inception in 2007. Yet additional Kenyan troops entered Somalia in October 2011 as "Operation Linda Nchi" was launched, with the official objective of defeating Al-Shabab. While the campaign has involved joint operations with AMISOM and the Somali army, the invasion of southern Somalia by Kenyan troops increased the (rightful) perception of Somalia as a battleground for different external interests and agendas, thus undermining the claim that the stabilization of the country constitutes the main objective.

That countries contributing to peacekeeping and military operations have their interests does not come as a surprise. In fact, "Linda Nchi," Swahili for "protect the nation," explicitly states the goal of the mission: protecting the nation, that is, the Kenyan nation. Rawlence's description of Al-Shabab's abductions in Kenya as "a convenient excuse" reinforces the view that the operation had already been planned before the abduction of foreign aid workers in Kenya by Al-Shabab and that the latter was Kenya's entry point to further the Jubaland Initiative project. But more specifically, this campaign raises the issue of the accountability and legitimacy of the operation and the actions of the Kenyan Defence Forces (KDF). Less than a month after the beginning of the operation and after seemingly agreeing to the Kenyan Operation, Sherif Sheikh Ahmed, then president of Somalia, declared that his government welcomed Kenyan support but not in the form of a military deployment within the country. Further, since its early stages, Kenyan attacks raised concerns about human rights abuses. Although early reports on civilian deaths and indiscriminate attacks prompted then Prime Minister Raila Odinga to promise an investigation, other incidents including unlawful detentions and torture continued to be reported. Besides, the particular interest of Kenya to secure its border with Somalia through a buffer zone conflicts, as Rawlence argues, with the attempts of the fragile Somali government to hold the country together. Questions of violations of international humanitarian law are exacerbated by a unilateral support for a new semi-autonomous region, which may add yet another layer of conflict.

While AMISOM, the Somali government and the Kenyan troops collaborate on joint operations and share a common enemy, the Kenyan operation, despite the integration of KDF with AMISOM since 2012, is to a certain extent reminiscent of the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006. While there have been calls for more African-centered peacekeeping operations in Africa, such unilateral invasions alongside an AU mission have problematic implications for the development of unified African peacekeeping operations and more specifically here for

questions of accountability when violations occur. The perception and reception of troops from other countries represent an important factor in the success of the mission and should not be dismissed as irrelevant.

With his pledge to keep Kenyan troops in Somalia until the country is stable, President Uhuru Kenyatta put an end to speculations on whether the Al-Shabab's attack on Westgate would force a withdrawal of Kenya from Somalia. Seeking to remind Kenyans and Somalis of the rationale of Kenyan presence on Somali soil in his October 1st speech, he asserts "they [Al-Shabab] came here," thus evoking the increasing incursions of Al-Shabab in Kenya as the drive for the military campaign in 2011. Echoing Odinga's "Kenya will not surrender to terrorists" after a grenade attack in Nairobi in 2012, he promises: "we went there to help them bring order in their own nation and [...] we will stay there until they bring order in their nation." If the determination characterizing the speech was to be expected in the context of an attack meant as retribution and "blackmail," the content does not suggest any attempt to rethink Kenya's involvement, and more disturbingly does not differentiate between Al-Shabab ("they came here") and other parties, including civilians ("until they bring order in their nation"). If there has been acknowledgement that the presence of Kenyan forces has helped secure some areas in southern Somalia, a retaliation through indiscriminate attacks and more human rights abuses will only provoke hostility and confirm Kenyan presence as an occupying force.

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*Ines Mzali obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Montreal, Canada, in English Studies. She is specialized in postcolonial African studies and wrote her doctoral dissertation on the concepts of negotiation and resistance in representations of postcolonial conflict in contemporary African works of fiction. She has presented and published on literary, media, or filmic representations of conflict in post-independence Somalia, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria. She is currently interested in an interdisciplinary study of the ways in which cultural representations of post-independence conflict deploy and rethink the Human Rights discourse and the logic of interventionism.*