

# US-African Summit for Security: What is in it for Somalia?

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*“We are open for Business” – Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud, Bloomberg News*

*“No investment will come to Somalia any time soon because of absence of stability” - Somalia’s Foreign Minister Dr. Baile*

*“None of the pledged \$3 billion for Somali will go to the hands of Somalia because of corruption” – Omar Gelle, President of Djibouti*

## Africa Comes to Dinner with Suspicion

The US-Africa summit in Washington DC (August 4-6), attended by nearly fifty heads of state, is a historic gathering for Africa’s leaders. For sure, it may not be as important as Sydney Poitier’s Oscar wining “guess who is coming to dinner?,” but it is timely since the summit came at a rare moment when the son of a Kenyan- born Harvard educated sits at the White House.

At no time in recent history did such a large cohort of African leaders met together to discuss stability, security, and system of governance with the lone world super power. The summit has both fluffy social events and serious diplomatic caucusing.



The fluff of the summit was marked by the highly orchestrated dinner reception, an African cousin, prepared with spices familiar to the guests, such as cumin, pepper,

and cinnamon. But the high light of the social event at the White House was claimed by the daughter of Rwanda's Paul Kagame, who towered above her father and Michelle Obama. That



scene, where a gorgeous African Tutsi queen stood on the red carpet in front of the White House lawn, fed the insatiable American taste for the outer beauty – a picturesque moment for Washington's tabloid.

Laced with lofty language and promises, the diplomatic aspect of the summit was represented by a declaration that insures “business investment” in the continent, bilateral “partnership in security sector” with participating countries, as well as insuring “freedom of the press.”

WardheerNews, one of handful African media with credentials at the summit, [editorialized the idealism](#) of the summit as declared by Obama in the following: “For those without the infrastructure, willingness or vision to come along with this great hope, those who want to oppress and violate their citizens and continue the same old story of hopelessness, this summit will not change much. All in all everyone is optimistic, but judging from the two thousand or so Ethiopian protests who were shouting “don't do business with African tyrants” it seems Africa cannot out run its negative narrative.”

Only time will tell how much of the contents of Obama's lofty declaration (to give Africans a better future by infusing both private capital and bilateral aid to investment-challenged continent and expansion of personal freedom to the continent's suffocated people) would be realized.

If recent history of US-Africa relations is a lesson, the immediate impact of the summer summit is basically a good will and a feel-good phenomenon; much of it would soon be forgotten beyond the bandits in the beltway. As the US Congress is in recess, much of what has been discussed would only be as good a lame duck president could promise. To have any tangible impact on Africa, the US-Africa summit hosted by Obama must top or at least equal to that legacy of Bush on fighting AIDS in Africa, or Nixon's opening of China to the West.

### **Beyond Lame Duck Legacy: America's Search for New Territories**

Beyond the three big ideas expressed in the US-Africa summit in Washington DC, there is a paradigm shift in American's power in three interrelated areas. The search for secure Africa, the appetite for new sources for raw materials, particularly oil, aka black Gold and new markets for its export could be argued to have heightened Washington's interest in inviting fifty African leaders.



The fact that most of the invited

African leaders are tyrants, autocrats, dictators, or those who lack legitimacy like Somalia's Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud and South Sudan's Silva Kiir diminishes any commitment on the part US to human rights. Incidentally both presidents will face huge demonstrations by their respective communities in Minnesota where large numbers of refugees, most of the victims of human rights violations, settled in the last ten years.

Africa seems to fit the bill and it is the last frontier for all. The continent, especially Somalia with its Al-shabab and Nigeria because of Boko Haram, is experiencing growing trend in terrorism and piracy. Both areas are concerns for US policy makers.

Whereas Africa represents new frontier for Pax-Americana, terrorism and piracy seem to hamper America's global ambitions. The combined impacts of seeking new frontiers while losing old clients like the Middle East and its limitations to deal with terrorism and piracy represents serious challenges to America's overreaching hand.

As Paul Kennedy explains in his authoritative book, *"The Rise and Fall of Great Powers,"* as the great American power stretches its military might, its ability to control vast territories diminishes, so dictates the unity of contradictions. Despite such a contradiction in what American can do and what it wants, Africa's resources are what America eyes so as to maintain its coveted status as the lone super power.

Associated with a possible diminishing ability of a declining great power is the search for new raw materials and new markets. Whether the US-Africa summit is an early sign of the demise of the US power or a renewed and honest engagement with Africa remains to be seen.

### **Past US-Africa Relations**

The US-Africa history has been negative since the decolonization of the continent. For much of the last century, most of US Aid, both military hardware and financial support went to Apartheid South Africa. Where it did not, it was used to maintain tyrants, autocrats, undemocratic rulers or dictators. Case in point is the US paid heavy price to Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia in exchange for its use of the Qanyaw telecommunication station in Asmara (Eretria). In the case of Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko (the Ruler of the roster that dominates all the roster of the village) was officially on the CIA's payroll in the 1970s, mainly for his clientele role in suffocating African National Congress (ANC) of Nelson Mandela and other liberation movements in the region.

Since the liberation of South Africa and the loss of America's number one ally in the region i.e., apartheid South Africa, America disengaged itself from African affairs, or pursued a policy of minimalist Africa engagement. The Somalia state failed during a period when such US minimalist policy was in place.



For those countries that US aid reached mainly in the form of food aid, it served as a catalyst towards inadvertently creating a condition for failed states. In the case of Ethiopia, for example, James Peron writes:

*“Relief aid was also intentionally kept away from some of the most severely affected areas because it suited Mengistu’s regime to starve its opponents. Relief ships were held for ransom and charged \$50.50 per ton for permission to unload their aid, some of which was confiscated to feed the army. The New York Times reported that aid officials believed that Mengistu’s regime sold some of the food aid on the world market to finance the purchase of arms.”*

In an Atlantic Monthly article in 1996, Robert Kaplan of John F. Kennedy’s Harvard School of Public Policy, depicted Africa as a massive wasteland plagued by instability, corruption and diseases, mainly AIDS. That article was widely circulated and made in some cases a must-read for both US embassies and USAID employees in the continent.

The conclusion of the article was a picture of America abandoning Africa after it contributed to its demise. Somalia’s failed state is partly the result of US’s neglect of troublesome Africa and a precursor to its minimalist policy. In other words, America’s involvement in Africa from the 1960s to the 1990s was either serving corrupt African elites to steer the ship to the demise of failed state or maintaining tyrants from falling under internal public pressures.

### **What is in US-Africa Summit for Somalia?**

In the years leading to Somalia’s failed state, the Barre regime used USAID food aid to exchange for arms, or to feed its militias to fight not foreign enemies but against its own insurgents.

In the past, two sources of food aid corrupted Somalia’s elites. According to Michael Maren, from the 1980s to the days leading to Barre’s removal from power Somalia was the “largest recipient of aid in sub-Saharan Africa. Maren vehemently argues that most of the aid, particularly US aid funds were lost in the “corrupt maze of the Somali government’s nepotistic bureaucracy.”

A second source of aid that fed Somalia's corruption came from Italy, particularly from its socialist party. According to Wolfgang Achter "Italy's aid to Barre was about \$1 billion between 1980 and 1990, most of the money lost in the maze of corruption, buying arms in the black market, thus prompting the New Africa Year Book call Somalia "the Graveyard of Aid."

In light of Somalia's attendance of the 2014 US-Africa summit, three views are worth mentioning here - that of President Hassan of Somalia, his Foreign Minister who contradict him while speaking to VOA/Somali Section, and President Gelle of Djibouti who painted a bleak picture of a run-away culture of corruption taking hold in Somalia.

In what now appears to be a hyperbolic and pre-maturely triumphalist press statement, President Hassan, true to his regular political gaffs, told the Bloomberg news "we are open for business," a message especially designed for oil comp. Continuing on his feel-good spree, he told Fred Pleitgen of CNN, "in Somalia, the level of risk right now we have – some people may claim that it's high, but it's not." Knowing that the President does not control even Mogadishu, let alone Somaliland that claims to have seceded, or Puntland which severed its relationship on August 2, 2014, it is clear his words don't console risk-averse investors.

The President's marketing strategy, selling Somalia's oil to investors, was dampened, if not directly wiped out, by his Foreign Minister, Dr. Baile Duale, who is accompanying him in this trip. Dr. Duale, a trained economist, told the VOA/Somali Section on August 6, 2014 that Somalia is not yet ready to secure investments. After explaining to his interviewer, the prerequisite for and conditions that facilitate highest rate of return for investors, unlike his President, he flatly admitted that it will take a long time to ready Somalia for serious investments.

Whether the Minister was intentionally embarrassing his beleaguered President or showing his own rockiness in the job, it was clear that either he was not a team player, or there is dysfunctional relationship within Hassan's administration. An irreversible damage is done to the President, of whom most Somalis already hold low opinion. The beleaguered President's low reception in Washington DC during this summit is a total reversal of the enthusiasm that surrounded him a year ago when even President Obama received in prompt without prior engagement (see Abdiazis' interesting Wardheernews's article of [president-us-visit](#)).

Omar Gelle of Djibouti, a participant of the Washington summit and a benefactor of Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mahmoud unequivocally undermined the President's claim of stability and good governance. While assessing why the West will not trust Hassan's government, Gelle said the West refused to put a penny in the hands of Hassan Sheikh's government, because "this government has neither defeated al-shabab nor arrested its wild culture of corruption." President Gelle indicated the pledge for \$3 billion for reconstruction of Somalia by the EU remains a pipedream because of wide spread mistrust of this President by the West.

### **Investing or colonizing Somalia?**

Omar Gelle is one of four IGAD presidents who had privately caucused with Secretary Kerry on planning and designing strategies to deal with Somalia's security sector and ways to strengthen AMISOM troops in Somalia. Why Somalia's President was not invited to this meeting, a sequel to the Addis Ababa meeting Kerry had with the foursome about few months ago, is once again a blow and a deliberate marginalization of Somalia in its own affairs.



One of the main outcomes of the US-Africa summit was articulated by a communique, in the form of presidential speech, by Obama. In it, the US endorsed a proposal to strengthen security apparatus in East Africa and fight al-shabab. Somalia is considered not as a player but as the theater where policies would be implemented. While US decided to channel good will and future military aid to Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Djibouti, Somalia is simply being referred as the theater for Islamic radicalism. The responsibility of fighting terrorism is primarily placed on Kenya, Ethiopia and the US, forming a tripartite compact that envision, plan and implement anti-terror strategies in the Somalia Theater.

If AMISOM's presence in Villa Somalia indicates a semi colonial arrangement between UNOPS and Somalia, in the minds of millions of Somalis, the Kerry IGAD occasional summits, excluding Somalia, is a camouflaged political marginalization, if not a soft colonization, of Somalia's failed state. President Hassan's speech few days prior to the summit that Somalia is only "held together

by the good will of the international community,” raised the spectrum of national suspicion whether he has endorsed “soft colonialism” to be places on his country.

The hope Somalis held in September 2012, [hope that WardheerNews editorialized](#), after a proxy clan based parliament elected Hassan Sheik to lead his country from a transitional to a provisional Federal government, seems to have crashed or about to crash. Not only is the hope to reinstate Somalia state being undermined by incessant corruption and inept leadership, the country is moving adrift and is more balkanized today than ever before. Unless the President relays more on an inclusive vision that promotes comprehensive reconciliation and start implementing unadulterated spirit of the Federal constitution, neither the West nor Somalia’s own citizens would take his bravado and misplaced sloganeering of “Somalia is open for business” any more serious.

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