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One thing the Spiked/Living Marxism faction usually does competently is denouncing spurious 'humanitarianism' (currently, it seems, being rebranded as 'human security') in geopolitics. This text (re-posted from <http://www.spiked-online.com>) is a useful brief history of the century of Western interference in Somalia that created the 'failed state' pretext for perpetual re-interference. It touches on the crucial question of 'aid' as economically destructive extension of war, although only momentarily. For a full, devastating account of how this works and WHY – i.e. the essential role of 'aid agencies' in the African new enclosures – see Silvia Federici's 'War, Globalization and Reproduction' <http://www.libcom.org/library/silvia-federici>. Also Wildcat's 1994 text 'Development by Other Means' http://www.geocities.com/novar_buttheclawar/WCSomali.html extends the same history covered here into a class analysis of the last 'humanitarian' invasion of Somalia, emphasising the rationally ferocious local resistance to NGOs and journalists.

Somalia: killed by 'kindness'

The east African state is a case study in how today's humanitarian intervention can be even more lethal than the old White Man's Burden.

If you want to see how new forms of Western military intervention can be even worse than the colonialism of old, look no further than Somalia.

This east African state has, for more than 100 years, been a plaything of the Western powers. It was divided and ruled by the British, French and Italians during the colonial period from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1960s; it was dominated by America in the late 1970s and 1980s, when it became a proxy state in Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan's Cold War against the Soviet Union. After the Cold War, in 1992, it became a stage for 'humanitarian intervention': thousands of US soldiers, including marines, landed on its beaches under the banner Operation Restore Hope, apparently to save Somalis from 'warlordism' and famine. And now it has become the latest outpost in the West's 'war on terror'. America has done an about-face and funded and armed the warlords it fought against in 1992 and 1993, encouraging them to face down the militia of the Islamic Courts Union that recently took the capital Mogadishu.

From colonialism to Cold War intrigue, from humanitarianism to counterterrorism, Somalia has been on the receiving end of every form of Western military intervention over the past century. Each era of intervention shared one thing in common: it screwed the people of Somalia, robbing them of the right to determine their own affairs and dividing them along lines that suited various Western powers. Yet, if anything, the new post-Cold War interventionism has proved even worse for Somalis than the colonialism and Cold War antics that went before it. Where the old forms of intervention, motivated by Western competition and interest, at least ensured a kind of stability in Somalia, the new forms of intervention, motivated by a combination of moral posturing and irrational fear, have left the country as a dangerous vacuum.

Somalia shows, perhaps more than any other state, that moralism in international affairs can be an even more lethal beast than Western realpolitik.

Thanks in no small part to Hollywood – which released *Black Hawk Down* in 2002, an action-packed, star-studded depiction of the US troops' clashes with Somali militia in Mogadishu in October 1993 – Somalia is best-known in the public mind as the 'humanitarian' venture that went wrong. Eighteen US soldiers and around 1,000 Somalis were killed in the Battle of Mogadishu, when US troops were

dropped into the capital by helicopter to wipe out leading ‘warlord’ Mohammad Farah Aideed. The US military intervention of 1992 and 1993 was justified as an attempt to rein in Somalia’s warring clans and, in the words of President George HW Bush, to ‘save thousands of Somalis’ from famine and the divisive ‘bloodletting’. It’s worth remembering that, for all the handwringing over Operation Restore Hope today, it was widely supported by commentators at the time.

The most remarkable thing about Bush senior and later President Bill Clinton’s claims to be rescuing Somalia from civil war – and the unquestioning attitude to their venture from reporters and pundits – is that Western intervention was the cause of civil conflict in Somalia in the early 1990s. As parts of Somalia descended into violent clashes in 1991 and 1992, the Western media was full of claims that the violence was a consequence of Somalis’ ‘warlike nature’ or a resurgence of tribal blood feuds from the pages of Somali history. And apparently it was up to the more enlightened West – the UN and aid agencies, backed by US military power – to try to put a stop to this backward conflict. In fact, the history that really shaped the conflict in Somalia in the early 1990s was that of European colonialism and American militarism in the east of Africa.

The territory of Somalia was shaped by European colonialism. By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonialists had divided the Somali people into British, French and Italian subjects. Britain had also handed the million Somalis of the Ogaden region over to Ethiopia. The British and Italian regions were brought together as the Republic of Somalia in 1960 – while many other Somalis remained divided under the rule of Ethiopia, Kenya and (until 1977) France. This era of European colonialism, from the end of the nineteenth century through to the mid- and late twentieth century, left Somalis with a legacy of poverty and civil strife. That legacy was built upon and exacerbated by America during the Cold War era.

In 1969, General Mohammed Siad Barre seized power in Somalia. He and his forces capitalised on the popular discontent and anger with the ruling elites sponsored by Britain and Italy. Keen to break the grip of the West over Somalia, Barre cosied up to the Soviet Union: he declared Somalia a socialist republic and provided naval facilities to the Soviets. Meanwhile, Somalis fought against the Ethiopian, Kenyan and French authorities that continued to oversee the old French section and other parts of Somalia, and demanded a united, post-colonial Republic of Somalia.

By the late 1970s, Barre had been won over from the Soviets by the Americans. Following the humiliation of defeat in Vietnam in the mid-1970s, America, under President Jimmy Carter, launched what came to be known as the ‘Second Cold War’ – where rather than committing troops to bolster its authority in the Third World it sought instead to weaken Soviet influence by sponsoring and arming various different regimes. In 1977, Carter identified Barre’s Somalia as one of six Third World states where Soviet influence was most vulnerable. In order to win Barre over, the Carter administration cut off all its aid to Ethiopia and encouraged Barre to invade the Ogaden region – that land of a million Somalis that had been handed by the British to the Ethiopians. When Barre’s forces duly stormed Ogaden, the Soviet Union denounced him, switched its support from Somalia to Ethiopia, and backed Ethiopian efforts – which were also assisted by Soviet-friendly Cuban forces – to expel the Somalis from Ogaden. Then US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski (who now, remarkably, makes a living from slating the current Bush administration for its war in Iraq) described Somalia as the new defining faultline, no less, between the West and the ‘Evil Empire’: the US-Soviet détente ‘lies buried in the sands of the Ogaden’, he declared.

Once it was back in the Western fold, Barre’s Somalia was effectively transformed into an American military camp under Carter and Reagan and later Bush senior. In August 1980, Barre signed a defence pact with the Carter administration, giving US troops access to the air and naval facilities at the Soviet-built port of Berbera. The port became a key base for America’s ‘Rapid Deployment Force’,

the massive military forces set up by Carter in 1979 and posted around the world to protect America's interests, especially in Korea, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. America's presence in Somalia allowed it to keep a watchful eye on both the horn of Africa and the Gulf. Barre was handsomely rewarded for his compliance. His increasingly corrupt dictatorship was funded and armed by Carter, Reagan and Bush senior. This period of Western intervention was especially disastrous for Somalis: through Barre, America manipulated and intensified ethnic divisions in Somalia, in order to store up the ever-more isolated Barre's rule over the country. Barre used American money to buy allies and American weapons to punish enemies. The old dream of a united Republic of Somalia – which motivated Somalis in the 1960s and 70s – was consigned to the dustbin of history.

It was these divisions fostered by the American-backed Barre regime that exploded in the early 1990s. As the Cold War came to an end in the late Eighties and early Nineties, Barre became surplus to requirements – he was no longer needed by the Americans, who no longer much cared what happened to Somalia. In 1991, America pulled out of Somalia and shortly afterwards the Barre regime, which had faced sometimes violent internal opposition since the early Eighties, fell and central authority collapsed. The ethnic divisions exploited by the Americans through Barre spilled into conflict in parts of the country, which soon became split along the lines of the old Anglo-Italian carve-up.

And yet, in 1992 Bush senior had the bare-faced cheek to declare that he was sending forces to Somalia to save the people from famine, division and bloodshed, and later Clinton described the storming of Mogadishu as an attempt to 'bring peace' to the country. It was as if the previous 15 years of American militarisation, and the decades of European colonialism before that, had never happened. In fact, what Western politicians and commentators described as 'warlordism' – clashes between different groups for territory and influence – was the logical consequence of continual and destructive Western intervention in Somalia.

If the civil strife of the early 1990s was a consequence of both colonialism and Cold War militarism, then it was further exacerbated by the 'humanitarian intervention' undertaken by America in 1992 and 1993.

Operation Restore Hope was effectively a stunt, a post-Cold War attempt by America to demonstrate both its military prowess and its moral credentials to the watching world. It was not an attempt to dominate Somalia, as America had in the 1980s, nor to divide and rule it, as European colonialists had in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather, this was really a media event (as evidenced by the fact that US forces landed on Somali beaches at a time that would coincide with the live evening news, and their landing was apparently carried out twice so that news cameramen could get better shots of it). Restore Hope was part of America's search for a sense of moral purpose after it had been robbed of its big, bad enemy, the Soviet Union.

That is why American officials continually exaggerated the scale of the famine in Somalia, which they claimed to be launching a war against: because this was a staged intervention rather than a genuine attempt to lift Somalia out of poverty. In truth, the worst of the famine was over before American forces arrived, and as some experts have pointed out the interventions by the US, the UN and numerous aid agencies increased poverty and hunger in Somalia rather than alleviating it. For example, the flooding of Somalia with aid effectively destroyed the country's agricultural industry (1). The stunt-like nature of America's war on famine and warlords can be seen in the fact that when 18 of its soldiers were killed in Mogadishu in October 1993, the US hastily withdrew: this was not supposed to be a long-term mission in which soldiers died, but rather a short, sharp boost to America's moral authority.

Yet even though the US intervention of 1992 and 1993 was fairly fleeting, it also internationalised, and thereby exacerbated, the civil tensions in Somalia, paving the way for the civil war in the Republic of Somalia during the 1990s. During Operation Restore Hope, America may have denounced some of the warlords as illegitimate and ‘evil’, but it implicitly supported or encouraged others. By choosing to transform Mohammad Farah Aideed into the bogeyman of Somalia (often by exaggerating his power and influence), US intervention inflamed those groups that opposed Aideed. According to one report, America went so far as to arm certain anti-Aideed forces, or at least turned a blind eye to their acquisition of arms. In June 1993, a journalist for the Washington Post described it as ‘waltzing with the warlords’, where American propaganda and manoeuvring gave certain warlords ‘too much prominence’ and in the process upped the stakes in the Somali civil conflict (2). It is not surprising that, following America’s withdrawal after Operation Restore Hope went wrong, the civil conflict intensified rather than giving way to Clinton’s ‘peace’.

A similar process of internationalising Somalia’s tensions is taking place again today, though this time under the rubric of the ‘war on terror’. It was recently revealed that Washington has duplicitously funded and armed a collection of eight ‘warlord militias’ to challenge the Islamists’ takeover of Mogadishu. Indeed, the warlord groups seem to be explicitly appealing to international sentiments, naming themselves as the ‘Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism’, or the ‘Anti-Terrorism Alliance’ for short. They’re also making unsubstantiated claims that the Islamic Courts Union has links with al-Qaeda. This is clearly an attempt to cloak themselves with the moral authority of the international ‘war on terror’, and it seems to have worked: America is backing them on the basis that anyone is better than radical Islamists (3).

These latest developments show how the ‘war on terror’ can create the very enemies it was designed to destroy. There may have been ragbag collections of Islamists in Somalia in recent years, but it was no doubt Western fearmongering about the possible emergence of an Islamist force in Somalia, and its support for those who opposed them, which allowed the Islamists to assume prominence and win support (4). Now, Somalia’s ongoing civil strife has been co-opted by the ‘war on terror’, and transformed from local violent clashes over influence in Mogadishu into part of an international war of good against evil, a frontline in the West’s obsession with facing down anything that looks or smells al-Qaeda-esque. Such further internationalisation of Somalia’s local tensions can only, yet again, up the ante and prolong the conflict. The divisions fostered by old forms of Western intervention are thus deepened by new forms of intervention.

Somalia is a case study in how today’s foreign interventions can be even worse than what went before them, leaving the states that they touch in a mess of unpredictable violence and uncertain futures. Colonialism certainly denied Somalis their democratic rights and the ability to develop and move forward, but it at least created state apparatus, law, local authorities, and rulers – both from without and within – who could organise and run the country’s affairs (in the colonialists’ interests, usually). Even America’s Cold War militarisation of Somalia allowed a strongman, Barre, to keep control of the state’s affairs. This was disastrous for a great number of Somalis, many of whom chose to fight against Barre, but it created some semblance of order.

By contrast, humanitarian intervention and its successor the ‘war on terror’ have left states such as Somalia as a vacuum, with no real or convincing authority or internal political life. These new forms of intervention are less about the West imposing a mission on to Third World states than they are a desperate search for a mission. Humanitarianism is about moral grandstanding, toppling the ‘bad guys’ in order to make the West look and feel good about itself; the question of who or what will replace the bad guys is rarely addressed. The ‘war on terror’ is about chasing evil bogeymen in order to make the West feel safe and secure; little consideration is given to what will happen once the bogeymen have been routed. Where Somalia in the past was shaped by the coherent interests of its rulers – divided into

British, Italian and French sections under colonialism, and transformed into an American outpost during the Cold War – Somalia today is shaped by the fleeting whims of Western powers seeking some moral kicks. The end result is a kind of neverending conflict, pushed and pulled this way and that way by indecisive and changeable Western powers.

Somalia has had more than enough of both the old and new colonialism: it is time Somalis themselves were left to shape and build the society that they want.

Visit Brendan O'Neill's website [here](#).

(1) Food aid: for or against?, International Review of the Red Cross, December 1996

(2) 'Waltzing with warlords', Washington Post, 25 June 1993

(3) Battle of Mogadishu intensified, Afrol News, 25 May 2006

(4) See The 'war on terror' self-destructs, by Mick Hume