

America's Covert War in East Africa:

Surveillance, Rendition, Assassination

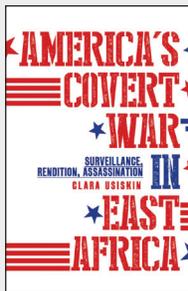
By Clara Usiskin

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America's Covert War in East Africa discloses the hidden face of security policy violations in the dark prisons of the CIA, and how much “War on Terror” complexity exists not only in the region but also in the world. War on Terror issues in regions like East Africa and around the world share some common themes across territories, although these themes manifest in different ways.

Clara Usiskin's book explores research in a 'national security zone' dominated by the discourse of counterterrorism, where there is no space for justice and human rights. In *America's Covert War in East Africa: Surveillance, Rendition, Assassination*, Usiskin elaborates upon topics that are rarely discussed in the context of the fight against terrorism, such as



“attacks on human rights defenders and constraints on civil society” (p. 141). The book presents detailed research on the War on Terror, specifically its causes and effects in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, by documenting hundreds of cases of the U.S. ‘rendition system,’ through which the CIA and its military affil-

iates ferry prisoners around the world for detention under suspicion of terrorism in extra-territorial U.S. military prisons, and carry out secret, targeted killings. Usiskin describes the unimaginable torture occurring in dark CIA prisons, inflicted on prisoners held in incommunicado conditions by the United States as part of its counterterrorism actions. One of these prisoners was Suleiman, an involuntary participant in an experiment based on the theories of two CIA contractor psychologists,

James Elmer Mitchell and John ‘Bruce’ Jessen. According to the torture program of the CIA, after the ‘psychic demolition’ job of exposure to their techniques, the victim would become a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate devoid of resistance and ready to comply with the will of the interrogators (p. 15).

The later chapters of the book describe a prison known as “Darkness” which was a prison notorious amongst U.S. detainees, so called because prisoners were held in constant, pitch black. The location of this prison has never been conclusively established, partly due to the fact that there have been successive prisons in Afghanistan with similar names. According to Usiskin, other locations of prisons on the CIA spider’s web have been confirmed by U.S. Senate Committee on Intelligence; these include three more in Afghanistan such as the ‘Salt Pit,’ and facilities in Thailand, Lithuania, Romania and Poland. Suleiman was among thousands of prisoners who were unlawfully arrested and abducted from East Africa for rendition into the CIA’s wider prison network. “Djibouti, the tiny state at the tip of the Horn of Africa where Suleiman was taken before his rendition to Afghanistan, appears to have functioned as a rendition hub, or staging post, for prisoners taken from locations across the region” (p. 26). Many former prisoners have described in detail how they were captured by Kenyan anti-terror police before being handed to U.S. forces for rendition to incommunicado detention and abuse in Djibouti, Afghanistan and finally Guantánamo Bay. The author highlights that these are not the only cases, and that planned assassination may represent an example of a databased approach to U.S. counterterrorism operations in the region. The Intercept’s research suggests that, between 2012 and 2015, fourteen locations in Africa and the Indian Ocean, including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia,

Uganda and the Seychelles, hosted nodes of the U.S. drone and surveillance network” (p. 101). *America’s Covert War in East Africa* also analyses secularization and group punishment in Kenyan counterterrorism operations, with evidence supported by several significant counterterrorism cases involving non-Somali Muslims in Kenya, in which these tactics served as a precursor to further abuses. “The massive increase in targeted killings and disappearances of Muslims in Kenya, explored later in this book, may be regarded as a further development in the same direction” (p. 158). An *Al Jazeera* documentary broadcast in December 2014 featured officers from four different units confirming that Kenyan police had killed over 500 terror suspects, and that targets were selected using training, tools and intelligence from Western intelligence agencies, including those of Israel and the UK” (p. 120). In other words, in these cases there is no official acknowledgement of involvement, and therefore no defense mounted in relation to the killing. As well as being unlawful under domestic, regional and international law, the lack of adequate investigation by the authorities into the past several years’ high incidence of killings of Muslims suggests a growing problem of impunity for those perpetrating Kenya’s War on Terror.

In cases of extrajudicial killing by drones or similarly, in the realm of digital surveillance, with its growing implications for East African citizens, the absence of real public debate is perpetuated by the national security justifications made by states. “Understanding the mechanisms by which people may have been surveilled, let alone gathering reliable evidence, is a task for experts, well beyond the abilities of average citizens. The issue is also complicated by the proportional nature of the right to privacy” (p. 199). Certainly, in the digital age, U.S. counterterrorism policy

uses communications technology and software-based systems of surveillance in order to achieve its objectives for rendition and assassination. Indeed, the U.S. military explicitly announced that its personnel intended to treat cyberspace as a military battleground: “disrupting the enemy will require the full inclusion of space and cyberspace operations into the traditional air-land-sea battlespace” (p. 165). Following 9/11, in the interest of America’s covert war, the CIA has supported an unprecedented system of global information control and surveillance that is only now becoming publicly understood.

The rhetoric of media counterterrorism discourse inherently lends itself to misuse because of the value-laden and vague meanings of key terms and the climate of political fear within which this language tends to be deployed.

Counterterrorism cooperation in practice and the prolific spread of a global counterterrorism lexicon—wherein words such as ‘terrorist’ and ‘terror suspect’ are used instru-

mentally, shifting their meanings and value according to political context and power relations—increasingly works to undermine the function of civil society and to further restrict the space within which dissent and criticism of governments can operate in East Africa (p. 142).

Also, “secularizations and human rights abuses” are the long-running themes of the War on Terror that should widely be treated. When surveillance is carried out by a foreign government beyond its own borders, as is the case with the U.S. and its global surveillance capacities, or with technology and support provided by foreign, private companies, many further issues arise. Indeed, in the name of national security and counterterrorism’s motifs of violent exclusion and exceptionalism to international law, East Africa’s political environment has become intermixed with systemic violations carried out against ‘other’ ethnic, political and religious groups. This book is rich in valuable content thorough outlook for the America’s Covert War and it is recommended to all researchers.