MANAGING DONOR PERCEPTIONS: CONTEXTUALIZING UGANDA’S 2007 INTERVENTION IN SOMALIA

JONATHAN FISHER

ABSTRACT
This article explores Uganda’s decision to send peacekeeping troops to Somalia in 2007 as part of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and argues that the intervention has as much to do with Uganda’s relationship with its donors as it has with maintaining regional stability – the official justification for intervention. Museveni’s decision to intervene in Somalia is the most recent example of his regime’s multi-pronged ‘image management’ strategy in which the President has involved Uganda in numerous foreign and domestic activities to ensure that donors perceive his government in a particular way vis-à-vis their interests: as an economic success story, a guarantor of regional stability, or, in relation to Somalia, an ally in the global war on terror. In so doing Museveni’s strategy, conceptualized here within a constructivist framework, has been able largely to avoid censure in areas of traditional donor concern such as governance, thereby achieving a considerable degree of agency in a seemingly asymmetric relationship.

THOUGH UGANDAN TROOPS HAVE BEEN IN SOMALIA since early 2007 as part of the AU peacekeeping mission AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia), their presence there has received particular scrutiny since the July 2010 Kampala bombings, an act perpetrated by the Islamist Somali rebel group Al-Shabaab. Since the attacks, which killed 74 people, Ugandan journalists and politicians have increasingly questioned the motivation behind their army’s involvement in the conflict, seeking better to comprehend what they are doing in Somalia and how this will affect

*Jonathan Fisher (j.fisher@bham.ac.uk) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the International Development Department at the University of Birmingham. Earlier versions of this article were presented in 2010 at the UK African Studies Association conference, University of Oxford, and in 2011 at the University of Birmingham as part of an ESRC-BISA Seminar Series on African Agency. I thank participants in these events and colleagues in Oxford and Birmingham for their helpful feedback. Research for the article has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC; award numbers PTA-031-2007-ES/F024509/1 and PTA-026-27-2861). I am also grateful to St Antony’s College, University of Oxford and to the Chester and Mellon and Cyril Foster Funds, University of Oxford for contributing to fieldwork costs.

Uganda. Understanding the motivations of African governments in committing troops to regional peacekeeping operations, more generally, is also a highly relevant concern for scholars of conflict studies, security, and international relations, as it is for those Western policy makers who fund such missions. Situating the Somalia decision within the wider context of African agency in the international system, this article will focus particularly on the role of Uganda–donor relations in Museveni’s decision to intervene.2

Using a constructivist framework in which relations between donors and African countries are understood as the product of a dynamic process of knowledge construction, the article explains Uganda’s decision to involve itself in the Somali conflict as part of a wider foreign policy strategy aimed at managing how it is perceived by Western donors. Intervention in ‘terrorist haven’ Somalia, it is argued, has provided the regime of President Yoweri Museveni with an opportunity to bolster and develop its international image as a key donor ‘ally against terrorism’. In reinforcing the salience of this narrative among donors, Uganda, in contrast to states like Kenya and Malawi, has continued to escape significant censure from its development partners, who finance between 35 and 50 percent of Ugandan government spending.3

This ‘image management’ strategy, it is suggested, moves beyond the manipulation of donors through foreign policy actions and decisions. Instead, the Museveni government has gone much further by framing its entire relationship with donors according to overarching narratives of security and counter-terrorism. These narratives prioritize not only the communication of ‘facts’ to donors but the advancement of particular ways of understanding these ‘facts’, which conform to existing conceptual frameworks promoted by Kampala. In doing so, the Museveni government has secured agency in relations with donors in spite of aid dependency. Though Uganda has not been unique among developing states in adopting such an approach, the article maintains that it has done so more successfully, at least, than many others – including the junior African contributor to AMISOM, Burundi. The study also makes a contribution, therefore, to discussions on Africa’s place and agency in the international


2. Additional motivations will also be assessed, although the wider literature on African regional interventions will not be engaged extensively – this remains, nonetheless, an important area for future research.

3. It remains to be seen whether Kenya’s 2011 intervention in Somalia will lead to a similar dynamic developing in its own relationship with the donor community.
system – a central concern of contemporary political science scholarship relating to the continent.4

The article is divided into three parts. The first outlines the nature of recent donor–Uganda relations and emphasizes the significance of donor perceptions in understanding the continued, and largely uncritical, international support for the Museveni regime. The second explores the notion of knowledge construction as it applies to African diplomacy and contends that Kampala has long played an active role in managing how its donors perceive it and its regional activities in order to construct, or conform to, narratives or images that posit it as ‘valuable’ to donors. Finally, the third part focuses on Uganda’s decision to intervene in Somalia and argues that this judgement was influenced, to a significant degree, by a desire to reinforce donor perceptions of the Museveni regime as an ‘ally against terrorism’.

The article draws primarily upon two sources. First, interviews carried out with current and former Western donor and Ugandan government officials during fieldwork in Kampala, London, Washington, and New York between 2009 and 2010. Second, documented evidence of Ugandan government engagement with Western policy makers, news agencies, consultancy firms, and think tanks as revealed in media reports, government statements, lobbyist disclosure documents, and UK government documents released to the author under the 2000 Freedom of Information Act (FOI).

Uganda and its donors, 1986–2007: the importance of perceptions in regime maintenance

Uganda’s ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) government rapidly came to rely upon donor funding to remain in office after taking power in 1986. Following a 1987 decision by President Museveni to implement structural adjustment reforms, donors (particularly the World Bank, the USA, and the UK) gradually begun to boost their support for his government to the extent that during the 1990s around 50 percent of the government’s budget was funded by its development partners.5 During the 2000s, this link between donor assistance and regime survival became even more acute as a result of increased budget support

4. As evidenced, for example, in the recent ESRC-BISA seminar series on ‘African agency’ held in London, Birmingham, Kent, and Stellenbosch, where a large number of papers on the subject were presented.
disbursement levels and supply (by the USA especially) of military training and equipment to Ugandan security forces. The favour shown by donors to Uganda does not seem to have been duplicated in many other donor-recipient relationships during the same period, and it is clear that the country had become an established ‘donor darling’ by the early 2000s. 

Museveni’s record in government, however, is not uncontroversial and his regime has been criticized frequently for its destabilizing regional policies, poor record on democratization, and failure to address corruption and alleged involvement in human rights abuses in the north of the country. Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, meanwhile, donors have cut aid and issued stark ultimatums to aid-dependent African governments involved in similar activities elsewhere – in Kenya (1995), Zanzibar (1995 and 2000), Ethiopia (1998 and 2005), and Malawi (2001 and 2011), for example. Indeed, in 1991–2, while Kampala continued to enforce a ban on political party activity, the same Western donors who supported it simultaneously suspended all non-humanitarian aid to Kenya and Malawi, insisting that these two governments immediately return to multi-party politics.

Uganda, however, even at its most controversial, has received little more than muted criticism and temporary partial divestment of aid, with little pressure from its donors to restore multi-partyism during the 1990s. The Museveni government faced limited public censure from major donors during its two invasions of neighbouring Congo (DRC) in 1996 and 1998 (aside from short-lived reductions in Danish aid and US military assistance). It has also escaped significant pressure during the

7. See, for example, OECD, ‘Aid statistics, donor aid charts’, <http://www.oecd.org/countrylist/0,3349,en_2649_34447_1783495_1_1_1_100.html> (11 July 2011).
2000s over high-level corruption involving Cabinet ministers and presidential family members. The closest it has come to facing substantial international pressure occurred a year before the Somalia operation when, in the lead-up to the 2006 general elections, the main opposition leader, Kizza Besigye, was arrested and prevented from campaigning. In response, five donors, including the UK, briefly diverted a small part of their financial contributions to the regime towards reconstruction projects in the north. This donor unease did not, however, lead to a sustained decline in support – quite the reverse. The Museveni government, therefore, has been treated far more leniently by its donors than might be expected.

Scholarly explanations for this donor behaviour have tended to focus upon international perceptions of the Museveni government, albeit rarely presenting their arguments in such terms. They suggest that donors have been more tolerant of the regime’s governance transgressions because it is seen as useful in other areas. They stress particularly how Uganda’s reputation as an economic success story has made it attractive to donors, who need a ‘model case’ to promote to their detractors. Ellen Hauser, for example, notes how donors have seen Uganda as an ‘economic success’ after GDP rose by over 6 percent annually from 1991, and could therefore use the country’s progress to defend their economic adjustment programmes in Africa. Likewise, Graham Harrison argues that the World Bank has seen Uganda as one of few credible ‘showcases’ of its programmatic ‘successes’ in the Third World and thus has felt compelled to continue supporting it, having ‘invested so much political capital’ therein.

15. Oil deposits were discovered in eastern Uganda in 2006, although commercial oil production is not expected to commence until at least 2012.
Uganda’s perceived importance as a regional peacekeeper and as an ally in the ‘global war on terror’ (GWOT) has also been put forward as an explanation for donor forbearance. Jeff Haynes and Susan Dicklitch argue that donors view Uganda as a crucial ‘island of stability’ in a highly volatile region and the Museveni government as an invaluable guarantor of such stability, and are therefore willing to ‘overlook obvious red flags [on governance] in their scramble to secure a semblance of stability in the ... region’.18 Similarly, Robert Pinkney and Joe Oloka-Onyango suggest that donors view Uganda as a key regional partner in the GWOT, particularly in the light of its support for the 2003 War on Iraq, and that this too has persuaded them to maintain their assistance to the regime and to hold back from criticizing it.19

This analysis certainly chimes with the public and private statements of donor officials who have variously described their support for the regime in terms of Uganda’s ‘strong economic growth’ (1997),20 ‘solid economic growth’ (2009),21 important role ‘as a regional player’ (2009),22 and centrality in ‘counter-terrorism in the Horn of Africa’ (2009).23 These officials have consistently depicted Uganda as a ‘star and ... role model for other countries’ (2000),24 as a ‘beacon of hope throughout the region’ (1997),25 and as ‘a key regional ally in the GWOT’ (2005).26 Museveni himself has also been described as ‘a strong leader in solving regional conflicts’ (2008),27 a reliable ‘leader of regional initiatives’ (2009),28 and an individual who has ‘stepped up [in the GWOT] and done more than anyone else’ (2010).29 It is clear, therefore, that donors have supported the Kampala regime so uncritically because they perceive it to be valuable for three key reasons unrelated to democratic governance: as an economic showcase, as a guarantor of regional stability, and as an ally in the GWOT.

Perceptions, ‘image management’ and African agency

Such donor perceptions, however, should be seen neither as static nor as reflecting an objective reality. This is particularly the case given the fact that the three donor ‘images’ of Uganda outlined above are highly contestable. Nicolas van de Walle, for example, has questioned the extent of Uganda’s ‘economic success story’, pointing to fiscal deficits, pervasive corruption, and rent seeking since the 1990s, while Roger Tangri, Andrew Mwenda, and Stefan Lindemann have provided a number of examples of ‘deregulation’ and ‘privatization’ initiatives being perverted by State House to benefit regime allies and kinsmen.30

Likewise, a reading of Ugandan regional policy which focuses upon Kampala’s two invasions of Congo and reluctance to commit to peace talks with the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) might lead one to rethink the idea of the regime as a ‘guarantor of regional stability’.31 The Museveni government’s centrality as a donor ‘ally in the GWOT’ is perhaps the least contentious of the images, although Kendall Stiles and Adam Thayne rank its compliance with international counter-terrorism legal norms as low (scoring 2 out of a possible 7) and worse than neighbouring Tanzania (4) and Sudan (5).32

Given this, donor perceptions should be understood not as the result of Uganda’s remarkable performance but as the product of a sociological process of knowledge construction that over time has led donor officials to perceive the regime according to certain overarching narratives. Originally a concept employed in philosophy and sociology, knowledge construction has been explored in a political science context in relation to Mobutu’s Zaïre, where donor perceptions drew on multiple sources and ‘authors’ of information, and were influenced by stimuli both inside and – crucially – outside Western governmental structures.33 One prominent such ‘author’, both Dunn and Mel McNulty have argued, was the Zaïrian regime itself; both scholars have demonstrated


how the Mobutu government used rhetoric supported by stirred-up ethnic violence to convince Western states that his regime was the only possible guarantor of stability in the former Belgian Congo. This tactic was apparently employed successfully for many years to persuade donors to continue supporting the Zaïrian dictator for fear of what might happen if he was no longer there to hold back ‘anarchy’.34

Christopher Clapham and Jean-François Bayart have also explored the ways in which African governments have engaged in external knowledge construction as a means to secure privileged relations with donors in their discussions of ‘subversion’ and ‘extraversion’ respectively.35 Bayart’s analysis is particularly important in its linkage of African knowledge construction to African agency. He argues, for example, that some African governments have used their dependent relationships with external actors to ‘mobilize [regime maintenance] resources’, particularly international aid, through their use of six ‘formalities’ spanning coercion, trickery, flight, mediation, appropriation, and rejection.36 This suggestion – that African governments need not rely on measures of ‘hard power’37 such as economic prowess or military might to rebalance their relations with donors, but can instead draw on the management of their international ‘image’ – challenges traditional notions of the continent’s place in the global system (particularly those put forward by dependency and realist theorists).38 It also raises important questions about the motivations behind African foreign policy decisions.

The Museveni regime has also played a key role in managing how its donors perceive it as a means to secure agency, and its decision to intervene in Somalia represents one of the more recent elements of its engagement with knowledge construction. It has done so through the use of image management strategies similar, in some respects, to those described by Dunn, Clapham, Bayart, and others. Ugandan image management strategies to manage donor perceptions represent a departure from those discussed above, however, in several important ways. First, the Museveni government has gone beyond promoting a single narrative to donors (‘guarantor of stability’, for example), instead advancing multiple images which simultaneously appeal to different donors and, indeed, different institutions within donor entities. The ‘economic success story’ image,

for example, has been particularly appealing to the World Bank, while the ‘ally against terrorism’ image has targeted US and UK security officials, especially those in the US Pentagon and National Security Council (NSC), and UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

Second, these images have been promoted over a longer period of time than those detailed by Clapham and Bayart, and have been skilfully adapted by Kampala to suit a changing international environment. The ‘ally against terrorism’ image, for example, focused on Sudan’s Bashir regime initially but, after 9/11, swiftly incorporated Al-Qaeda into the narrative. Finally, Museveni has advanced a much more thorough, informed, proactive, and developed programme of image management than those highlighted by Dunn, Clapham, and Bayart. Aside from fostering close, personal ties with successive donor policy makers (including former UK development ministers and US security officials), Museveni and his staff have also been extremely proactive in engaging with Western media organizations, think tanks, academic institutions, and NGOs in order to manage how these bodies (whose reports and analyses are often read, or even commissioned, by donors) present Uganda. Kampala has also made strategic use of Western consultancy or lobbying firms to influence policy makers, spending over US$1 million annually by 2005 in retaining several firms in Washington and London.39

Clearly not every Ugandan policy decision, including the country’s much-criticized interventions in Congo, has been taken with image management in mind. The ultimate purpose of Ugandan image management has been regime maintenance – donors who view the Museveni government positively are more likely to provide it with increased support, thereby entrenching its hold on power. Kampala, therefore, has not always refrained from actions to defend or augment its domestic position even when such behaviour may undermine one or more donor images. In Congo, the regime clearly (and correctly) calculated that the benefits of intervention (including installing a pro-Kampala regime in Kinshasa, keeping Ugandan forces occupied and exploiting Congo’s natural resources) outweighed the possible costs (reduction in donor support) vis-à-vis its domestic supremacy.

It should also be noted that aspects of the intervention did, in fact, support Kampala’s image management agenda in the longer term: Uganda’s demonstration of its military capacity and effectiveness recommended it to donors as a strong regional player, prepared and equipped to engage in future regional conflict scenarios. Furthermore, the regime has, during the 2000s, succeeded in using its involvement in Congo to bolster its image as a ‘go-to’ regional mediator for donors. By embedding

itself fully in Congo’s internal problems, Kampala has been able to present itself as a key donor agent for resolving these problems, becoming an obvious candidate for inclusion in donor-funded regional initiatives such as the Tripartite-Plus Joint Commission.40

Since Museveni came to power other African governments, most notably those of Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, have also used similar image management strategies to the same effect in their engagement with donors. In addition, Uganda is not unique in having used lobbying firms to protect its reputation abroad.41 Kampala’s image management strategies are significant in their own right, nonetheless, because of their continued success over time and the influence they have had over other regimes in their dealings with donors. Kagame, for example, fought alongside Museveni during the latter’s campaign to capture power in Uganda, and witnessed firsthand how NRM officials conducted themselves with donors.42

The remainder of this article explores one of the main images promoted by the Museveni regime in the 2000s – Uganda as an ally against terrorism – and shows how the decision to intervene in Somalia served as a means to bolster this narrative in donor minds and secure agency at a time when the regime’s international reputation was suffering.

Reinforcing donor perceptions: the GWOT and Uganda’s decision to intervene in Somalia

Uganda as an ‘ally against terrorism’: Since the mid-1990s, the Ugandan regime has actively promoted itself to donors, especially the USA, as a key African ally in the fight against global terrorism. The regime’s advancement of this image originated during 1994–6 in response to Sudan’s sponsoring of a number of fundamentalist Islamic terrorist organizations and individuals.43 After it became clear that, with Sudanese support, some of these groups had successfully killed US citizens in the 1998 East African embassy bombings, Washington declared the country a ‘supporter of international terrorism’ and Uganda presented itself as a ‘frontline state’ in the fight against Khartoum’s terrorist activities.44 Kampala then proceeded to cement this reputation through hosting

44. Khadiagala, Meddlers or Mediators?, p. 193.
anti-Sudan summits (such as the 1998 Entebbe summit, attended by Bill Clinton) and fighting a proxy war with the Bashir regime through supplying military and logistical support to the rebel SPLA, supposedly provided to Kampala by Washington.45

Post-9/11, the Ugandan government has taken further steps to portray itself as a key donor ally in this area. In 2002, for example, the NRM-dominated Ugandan Parliament pushed through a draconian Anti-Terrorism Act which consciously echoed the 2001 US PATRIOT Act and Kampala has frequently detained ‘Arab’ foreigners during the 2000s in anti-terrorist raids.46 It has also welcomed FBI and other donor security organizations to the country, allowing them to conduct counter-terrorism operations freely, and was one of only five African states to support the US-led 2003 Iraq War.47

The extent to which this latter decision in particular was made with an eye to influencing donor perceptions is evident. According to a former Ugandan minister present at the ‘very stormy’ 2003 meeting where Iraq was discussed, Museveni put forward a number of unconvincing arguments connecting domestic rebel movements to Al-Qaeda and the Saddam Hussein regime in making his case that Uganda should publicly make clear its approval of the US-led intervention, but failed to win over the ‘majority’ of the Cabinet.48 The President nonetheless forced the decision through, leaving many in attendance with the strong impression that the judgement had been based on undisclosed reasoning relating to ‘Uganda’s relationship with the US and UK’.49

Kampala has also aligned itself with the USA against Eritrea – a state the USA considered designating a ‘state sponsor of terrorism’ in 2007, with Museveni travelling to Asmara in 2007 to deliver a ‘tough message’ to Isaias Afwerki, the Eritrean President, on his regime’s supposed support for militant Somali terrorist groups.50 Museveni subsequently gave a ‘full briefing’ on his visit to US security officials, providing them with a novel ‘insight into Isaias’ thinking’.51 Ugandan officials also led a successful UN Security Council (UNSC) effort in 2009, welcomed by

47. Ibid.
48. Interview, former Ugandan Cabinet minister, Kampala, 12 February 2010.
49. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
Washington, to impose sanctions on Eritrea for these activities, and made clear to US journalists that ‘we petitioned for sanctions’.  

The Museveni regime has sought increasingly to portray its own domestic fight against rebel groups (primarily the LRA and Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)) as both ‘Uganda’s war on terror’ and as a significant part of the GWOT itself, despite the LRA having no substantive links to Islamic fundamentalism. Through lobbying activities, speeches, and interviews with the US, UK, and other Western media organizations, the regime has promoted the idea to donors that it is not only a key ally against international terrorism, but just as much a victim of terrorism as they are. That this has been a calculated change in the narrative initiated by Kampala can be seen in the regime’s gradual tendency to refer to the LRA as ‘terrorists’ rather than simply ‘bandits’ or ‘criminals’ in front of donor audiences during the 2000s.

In general, the regime has used these actions and experiences consistently to present itself to donor policy makers as a valuable and important part of the worldwide anti-terrorism coalition. This has been done both in private (during conversations and meetings, for example, with the US president and his national security team, often initiated at Museveni’s request) and in public; in 2003, Museveni spoke to US media and diplomatic officials on the subject of ‘Forging US–Africa partnerships against terrorism’. He also told Pentagon officials in Kansas in 2008 that he had recently suggested to his US counterpart that a joint USA–Africa counter-terrorism conference be held where Uganda could share more widely its accumulated knowledge on ‘defeating terrorism’. Indeed, between 2005 and 2007 Uganda’s Ministry of Defence hired a Washington public relations firm, Scribe  

53. In a 2002 interview with Canada Television, Museveni argued that both groups were ‘directly linked to world terrorism’ (CTV, 30 August 2002).  
57. ‘Speech by Yoweri Museveni’, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 26 September 2008.
Strategies, specifically to represent its interests in the USA as a partner ‘in the war on terrorism’.  

As noted above, donor policy makers, particularly in the USA, have internalized this narrative and have often perceived their relationship with the Museveni government primarily through this lens, with concerns over democratization clearly taking a back seat as a result. After the controversial 2006 Ugandan elections, for example, US diplomats in Kampala were told to ‘get over it [concerns about the poll’s credibility]’ by the State Department for fear of compromising the close US–Ugandan counter-terrorism relationship.59

**Somalia**: Concern in donor capitals about Somalia becoming a ‘breeding ground’ for terrorist organizations has abounded since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1993, the last government to exercise effective control throughout the territory. Indeed, in the aftermath of 9/11, US and UK officials reportedly discussed bombing suspected ‘terror bases’ in the pseudo-state.60 Western fears appear to have intensified, however, by June 2006 when secular ‘warlords’ in control of Mogadishu, reportedly backed by Washington, were forced out of power by the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), an Islamist coalition of moderates and extremists, which steadily extended its control over south/central Somalia.61 Indeed, a former White House official notes that by late 2006 memos on Somalia, the UIC, and an extremist offshoot of the Courts – Al-Shabaab – begun to appear on George W. Bush’s desk ‘on a daily basis’ – an indication of how central a concern the issue had become for policy makers.62

Against this background, the USA and other donors resolved to support an African-led peacekeeping intervention force in Somalia by the end of 2006. Indeed, in the autumn of that year senior US officials even lobbied the UNSC – unsuccessfully – for a fully-fledged UN operation to be deployed.63 After this effort failed, donors turned to the AU and the (eastern African) Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) as potential coordinators of such a mission, and made it clear to IGAD governments (including those of Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, and Uganda) that donors would provide the necessary military equipment,
In early 2007, for example, it was announced that the USA, the UK, and the EU had allocated US$68 million for the proposed AMISOM operation and former Bush administration personnel note that a ‘training and equipping funding package’ was included in this support. Donor contributions since 2007 have risen annually, increasing particularly after the Kampala bombings, and the USA alone has provided over US$185 million to support AMISOM as of 2011. The Ugandan and Burundian militaries have therefore benefited in a very practical sense from their participation in AMISOM, which has included the deployment of 6,000 and 3,000 troops respectively from the two countries. Kampala’s involvement, however, was more than simply a quid pro quo for receiving donor military supplies.

The Museveni regime, for example, appears to have taken advantage of the focusing of donor minds on Somalia during 2006 by declaring its willingness to intervene and act as the coordinator of a regional peacekeeping force. In so doing it made strong play of the ‘terror’ threat posed by groups in Somalia. In an August 2006 letter sent by the Whitaker Group, Kampala’s then major Washington lobbyist, to Bush’s NSC team, an ‘urgent’ USA–Uganda meeting was suggested to discuss the matter, and US security officials were assured that ‘President Museveni shares President Bush’s particular concern about Somalia and its potential as a writhing hotbed of terrorism’. The letter went on to remind its readers that ‘President Museveni was ... among the first ... to support President Bush in the war on terrorism’ before informing them that the Ugandan leader ‘would like to talk to [Bush] about ... a policy aimed at keeping Somalia out of terrorist hands’. A meeting later took place between the two leaders in October, where Somalia was indeed discussed. This initial suggestion by Kampala of what would later become AMISOM very much sought to depict a Ugandan intervention as part of a fight against global terrorism and drew heavily on already established donor perceptions of Uganda as a key ally in the GWOT.

69. Ibid.
Following the deployment of Ugandan troops to Mogadishu, Ugandan and donor officials have maintained that Kampala’s decision to join AMISOM has ‘nothing to do with our long-standing relationship with the United States [and other donors] against terrorism’. Indeed, domestically, the Ugandan government has maintained that its intervention was premised on considerations closer to home. In a February 2007 parliamentary debate, for example, Defence Minister Crispus Kiyonga listed five major reasons for involvement, almost all of which focused on domestic or regional concerns. These included the moral obligation incumbent upon Ugandan soldiers to ‘undertake such missions for the good of the region’, the close relationship between ‘the Somali people… [and] …Uganda’ and the apparent link between ‘unstable Somalia… [and] …small arms proliferation into Karamoja [northeastern Uganda]’. Kiyonga also added, as a ‘secondary’ point, that Ugandan forces would benefit from the increased training and peacekeeping experience. The only international reason mentioned by Kiyonga was the need to honour Uganda’s obligations to the UN and AU.

To these ‘official reasons’ may be added other possible explanations which also have little connection to the donor–Uganda link. AMISOM, for example, provided Kampala with an ideal occasion to reoccupy its military forces (recently returned from Congo) and present them with renewed opportunities for personal development and enrichment abroad. Museveni himself has long held genuinely pan-African views and observers have often attested to his desire to be seen by continental counterparts as a regional statesman in the mould of Tanzania’s Nyerere. His dispatching of troops to Mogadishu could be seen, therefore, as a means by which the Ugandan leader sought to satisfy his own personal and ideological objectives.

These alternative explanations are not unpersuasive, although it is not surprising that a government which has often claimed domestically to have an ‘independent foreign policy’ would refrain from using donor-centric arguments in addressing its domestic audience. Moreover, these domestic and regional motivations did not persuade Kampala to send troops to support the earlier AU mission in Sudan (AMIS) between 2004 and 2007. This suggests that other, more critical factors convinced the
Museveni regime to involve itself in Somalia; the most plausible candidate for the additional motivation to intervene in recent years is the government’s desire to manage its relations with the donor community. This is not to deny that diverse additional concerns also motivated the decisions taken by the Museveni regime, but rather to recognize that international concerns ranked above others in this particular case.

In contrast to its domestic discourse, internationally the regime has more often portrayed its involvement in Somalia as part of its continued commitment to fighting global terrorism, particularly by linking Al-Shabaab to Al-Qaeda – a tactic previously employed in its presentation of the LRA and ADF. In a 2009 meeting with Washington’s UN envoy Susan Rice, for example, Museveni made it clear that the ‘enemy’ in Somalia were ‘terrorists’ and that it was ‘important to send a strong message to terrorists that they can’t go on terrorizing populations in Africa’.\(^76\) He then thanked the US for its support in Uganda’s own ‘fight against the LRA’ in a clear attempt to draw parallels between the two conflicts.

A similar message was put forward via Albany Associates, a UK communications firm hired to lobby Western policy makers and media houses on behalf of AMISOM. In a 2010 online comment piece, for example, one of the firm’s senior associates made it clear that AMISOM was fighting against ‘an alliance of local Islamists and their Al-Qaeda allies’, while a 2009 editorial by Ugandan presidential aide Hope Kvingere emphasized that ‘Al-Qaeda … want to make [Somalia] a safe haven for criminals. We ask the world to help us fight the international terrorists … the last thing the region needs is for [Somalia] to become a haven for international terrorists.’\(^77\) Unsurprisingly, the regime’s international presentation of the Somalia intervention as part of its prolonged battle against global terrorism has intensified since the Kampala bombings. In August 2010, for example, Museveni wrote in *Foreign Policy* that ‘Somalia is now a central front in the fight against international terrorism … the support of the international community remains critical … in this common endeavour’.\(^78\) In the same month, his press aide stated categorically that ‘Al-Qaeda is responsible for [the] Kampala bomb blasts’, noting that ‘Al-Shabaab … is … without the means and experience to marshal … global terror operations on its own … Al-Qaeda does have this capacity’.\(^79\) He then went on

---

79. ‘Al-Qaeda is responsible for Kampala bomb blasts’, *New Vision*, 5 August 2010.
once again to link Al-Qaeda to the ADF and stress that ‘Uganda’s current war on terrorism … is one against the very core of global terror’.

This is not to say, of course, that these claims have been without substance; commentators agree that the ADF did receive some training and assistance from Al-Qaeda in the 1990s and that Al-Shabaab has strong ideological, though weak (and maybe even non-existent) organizational links to the terrorist group.80 The point, however, is that Kampala’s engagement with international actors over AMISOM, even before the mission’s formal existence, has presented a Ugandan intervention in line with earlier rhetoric on Uganda as a donor ‘ally against terrorism’. As it did in relation to Sudan, Iraq, and Eritrea, the Ugandan regime has portrayed, at least in the West, its involvement in Somalia as a continuation of its firm alliance with donors against terrorism, and has recycled rhetorical image management techniques commonly employed during this period. Because it built on a previously promoted narrative in order to reinforce existing donor perceptions, the decision to intervene in Somalia should be seen as a further part of Kampala’s international image management strategy.

That this strategy continued to secure agency for the regime in its post-2007 relations with donors is clear – during interviews, several senior donor officials acknowledged that Uganda’s presence in Somalia made it ‘more difficult [for donors] to criticize’ the Museveni regime for domestic transgressions.81 Certainly, private declarations by US officials that Washington would be ‘tougher’ on Kampala ‘in the future’ appear to have come to nothing.82 Furthermore, following government suppression of protests in Malawi in mid-2011, the UK cut its entire budget support allocation to Lilongwe, while the US Millennium Challenge Corporation agency suspended its entire Malawi compact.83 By contrast, several months previously, Ugandan security forces had dealt fatally with similar protests in Kampala but elicited a much more lenient response from London – a qualified reprimand from Africa minister Henry Bellingham.84 In his statement, Bellingham made it clear to Museveni that his government’s use of ‘excessive force’ against protesters ‘demeans him’ but remained at pains to praise him for the ‘excellent work which

82. Ibid.
he’s doing in … counter-terrorism’. The US response was also more reticent, with the imposition of ‘sanctions’ being explicitly ruled out. The value of this ‘ally against terrorism’ narrative for securing Ugandan agency, therefore, has continued to be demonstrated a decade after 9/11; this article maintains that the decision to become involved in Somalia was taken by Kampala primarily as a means to bolster the salience of its anti-terror stance in donor minds.

This argument is strengthened by considering the general context in which the decision was made. Though Uganda’s contribution to AMISOM was formalized only in late 2006, it is clear that Kampala had been keen to send troops into Somalia long before this time. As early as March 2005, for example, Museveni signalled to regional counterparts that Uganda was prepared to send troops to Somalia ‘as soon as possible’ and a high-powered Ugandan delegation told UK officials in London the following month that Kampala intended ‘to deploy two battalions in Somalia’. Though the IGAD mission – IGASOM – came to nothing by mid-2006, senior Ugandan army officials continued to emphasize throughout that year that Uganda remained ‘ready to deploy in Somalia’. When AMISOM was suggested by the AU and UN in late 2006 (following intense lobbying by donor officials), therefore, Uganda had already decided that it would be willing to join, even lead, such an intervention.

The decision to intervene in Somalia was thus made by the regime no later than March 2005 – joining AMISOM itself in 2007 appears to have been an operational, rather than substantial, matter. The timing of this decision is significant since, by the spring of 2005, the Museveni regime’s international reputation had plummeted as the President’s ongoing campaign to abolish presidential term limits reached its climax. Kampala’s commitment to restoring multi-partyism was also being called into question increasingly, to the extent that in March 2005 the UK held back about 8 percent of its Ugandan aid programme owing to the regime’s

86. ‘What the US is ignoring in Uganda’, Daily Monitor, 24 July 2011.
89. Interview, former senior UK official, by telephone, 9 June 2010.
‘lack of progress’ in ‘establishing a level playing field for parties’ wishing to compete.91

That the regime was concerned by the damage to its reputation abroad (made worse when opposition leader Kizza Besigye was arrested in November 2005)92 is clear. Not only did it begin to send frequent ministerial delegations to European capitals from April onwards to ‘explain’ the regime’s actions (including at a May debate held at London’s Royal African Society), it also hired a London lobbying firm – Hill and Knowlton – specifically to neutralize Western media criticisms.93 Indeed, a representative of this firm sat in on a November meeting between Ugandan and UK officials in London where the former delegation ‘mounted a defence’ of their government’s domestic activities.94 The decision to join AMISOM was made, therefore, against the background of governmental planning for a comprehensive and extensive public relations campaign aimed at restoring Uganda’s positive reputation in Western capitals.

Conclusion

In exploring why Uganda chose to intervene in Somalia this article has argued that international considerations, particularly a desire to manage donor perceptions, were the most important factor motivating Museveni’s decision. Reliant upon donor funding, the regime has been vulnerable to possible donor governance conditionalities that threaten to undermine its hold on power. In order to retain international support while evading such conditionalities, Kampala made a concerted effort to manage how donors perceive it by engaging proactively and skilfully in the process of donor knowledge construction. By establishing and advancing images of itself that depict Uganda as valuable to Western policy makers, the regime has been able to persuade them that it continues to be worthy of assistance in spite of democratic transgressions. The construction and management of these images has entailed both practical and presentational strategies, including embracing policies favoured by donors, employing Western lobbying firms, continuous engagement with Western news agencies and think tanks, and dialogue with key donor policy makers.

The government’s intervention in Somalia has been part of this image management strategy and has been aimed at bolstering one of several images promoted by Kampala – Uganda as an ‘ally against terrorism’. In providing evidence for this claim, the regime’s historical advancement of this narrative has been explored and it has been shown that its rhetoric on Somalia (at least outside Uganda) has developed naturally from within this discursive tradition. The decision to involve Ugandan troops in Somalia, therefore, was made as part of a conscious and longstanding Kampala strategy to manage its international image and to secure, thereby, greater agency in its relations with donors.

Such an analysis clearly has implications beyond Uganda and provides a novel, constructivist framework for understanding other donor–recipient relationships and the extent to which space for African agency can be carved out within them. It is important to note, however, that while the Museveni government is not the first African government to attempt to manage how its donors perceive it, it has nevertheless undertaken one of the most skilled and comprehensive approaches to doing so. It is telling, for example, that the other African contributor to AMISOM – Burundi – has not fared as well as Uganda in maintaining donor support since 2007. Indeed, in March 2011, the UK announced that its aid programme in the country would close and, in explaining this decision, made no mention of Bujumbura’s involvement in the Somalia operation or in fighting terrorism.95

Burundi’s contribution to AMISOM did not appear, therefore, to have persuaded London that it, like Uganda, was worthy of continued support as a valuable ally in the GWOT. Whether or not this can be explained by Bujumbura’s consistent failure to present its involvement internationally in such terms, or indeed as part of any narrative, is purely speculative at this stage. What is clear from this, is that donor support for an African government is not necessarily assured even if that government is involved in donor-sponsored peacekeeping activities. Relationships between donors and African states are based upon years of interaction and confidence building, and can rarely be boiled down to a series of quid pro quo deals. Supporting AMISOM has been a successful means for Kampala to secure agency with donors because it resonates with a longstanding and well-established narrative promoted by the Museveni regime about its value to the international community.

95. Hansard (Commons), 22 March 2011, col. 1101W.