

## THE SOMALI CHARCOAL INDUSTRY—STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

By George F. Ward

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In this Thursday Dec. 5, 2013 photo, workers fill plastic bags with charcoal believed to be from Somalia at a charcoal trading facility in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. Charcoal from Somalia is prized in Gulf nations: Made from acacia trees, it's slow burning and gives a sweet aroma to the region's beloved grilled meats and waterpipes. It is also banned by the United Nations, because its shipments rake in millions of dollars a year for al-Qaida-linked militants. (Source: AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili.)

Ambassador (ret.) George F. Ward is editor of IDA's Africa Watch and a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses. He is a former U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Namibia.

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Lesotho and South Africa. Source: The World Factbook (CIA, 20 June 2014), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lt.html>.

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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## Trade in Somali Charcoal

Charcoal is not only the primary cooking fuel in Somalia, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa, it is also [especially prized in the Gulf states](#) for its quality. Made largely from the wood of acacia trees, it is slow burning and aromatic, imparting a sweet aroma to the region's grilled meats. Somalia's charcoal exports to the Gulf have long been carried by a fleet of dhows and small freighters plying the route between Kismayo and Barawe in southern Somalia and ports in the Gulf region such as Khasab, Oman, and Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The ships often arrive in the Somali ports loaded with sugar, which is exchanged for the charcoal. In February 2012, the United Nations Security Council, concerned that the charcoal trade had become a significant source of revenue for al-Shabaab, passed a [resolution banning that trade](#) and calling on all nations to enforce the ban. Somali governments since the 1970s have also [banned](#) the export of charcoal. Unfortunately, the bans often have been ignored.

## Enter the Kenyans

A report submitted to the United Nations Security Council on July 12, 2013, by the Security Council committee established to monitor the situation in Somalia provided [extensive documentation](#) on the involvement of the Kenya Defense Force (KDF) contingent of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), Somali militias, and al-Shabaab in continuing violations of the UN and Somali bans. According to the report, when troops of the KDF and members of the allied Ras Kamboni militia entered the port of Kismayo in southern Somalia on September 28, 2012, they found some 4 million sacks of charcoal worth at least \$60–\$64 million. Comparable stockpiles existed in other Somali ports, including the al-Shabaab-controlled port of Barawe. KDF commanders almost immediately began pushing for the temporary lifting of the ban, ostensibly to provide for one-time export of the stockpiles.

In reality, the KDF demand was cover for maintaining the charcoal export business indefinitely. Despite the UN's refusal to lift its ban and the continuing opposition of the Somali government in Mogadishu, KDF leaders and Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed Islam "Madobe," leader of the Ras Kamboni militia, took the unilateral decision to begin the export of charcoal from Kismayo. The UN Monitoring Group was able to determine that at least 1.5 million sacks of charcoal worth \$20–\$26 million were exported from Kismayo in November and December 2012. In addition, large quantities of charcoal were transferred by land to the al-Shabaab-controlled port of Barawe. The exports were taxed by both the Ras Kamboni militia and al-Shabaab. The exported stocks were immediately replaced by new production from al-Shabaab-controlled areas of southern Somalia, where a forested area was leveled. All told, the Monitoring Group estimated that the rate of charcoal exports rose beginning in November 2012 to a rate of 24 million sacks annually, with a market value of \$360–\$384

million. This represented an [increase of around 140 percent](#) over the previous year. The new level of production would require 10.5 million acacia trees annually, implying the deforestation of 676 square miles and, as previously reported by Ashley Bybee in [Africa Watch](#), severe humanitarian implications for local communities.

## Strange Bedfellows

According to the recent [UNEP/Interpol report](#), the Somali charcoal export trade has not in the meantime diminished. Al-Shabaab earns somewhere between \$38 million and \$56 million annually from charcoal exports from Kismayo and Barawe. In addition, the group collects “taxes” from charcoal traders at roadblocks and checkpoints. At one roadblock alone, al-Shabaab is reported to have collected \$8–\$18 million annually.

The Ras Kamboni militia, which is currently allied with the KDF, was formerly associated with al-Shabaab. Like al-Shabaab, the Ras Kamboni militia shares in the income from charcoal exports and collects “taxes” at checkpoints and roadblocks. In Kismayo, the “Juba Business Committee” is dominated by Ras Kamboni. The members of the committee traded charcoal when al-Shabaab controlled the city and have continued since the KDF took over.

The consequence of these connections is a seamless network for the production and export of charcoal. The [UN Monitoring Group](#) noted the lack of any significant security incidents along routes on which checkpoints were variously controlled by al-Shabaab, Ras Kamboni, the Somali National Army, and the KDF. In human terms, the charcoal market is dominated by a small number of professional traders, around 70 in number, who are based in Kismayo, the Kenyan border town of Garissa, and Nairobi. These individuals act as brokers for larger traders based mainly in the United Arab Emirates. All the Somalia-Kenya based traders deal with al-Shabaab in one way or another, and some are representatives of that organization. Some of the principals in the charcoal trade in the UAE are also directly linked with al-Shabaab.

## Conclusion

This look into the mechanics of the Somali charcoal trade illustrates the complexity of the conflict in Somalia. Kenya, although formally a participant in AMISOM, which operates in support of the Somali national government, is also complicit in support of trade that provides income to al-Shabaab, its military opponent both inside Somalia and, increasingly, at home in Kenya. Since the charcoal trade is al-Shabaab's [primary income](#), it is not an exaggeration to posit that a portion of the resources used to carry out terror attacks in Nairobi and in Mombasa and other locations along the Kenyan coast is being generated with the acquiescence or even the cooperation of the KDF and Kenyan business interests. While al-Shabaab vows to continue its attacks on civilian targets inside Kenya as long as the KDF remains in Somalia, the self-interests of Kenyans inside the government, military, and business establishment will tend to prolong that deployment.

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Lesotho and South Africa. Source: The World Factbook (CIA, 20 June 2014), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/lt.html>.

Lesotho is a small, landlocked country of 2 million that is surrounded entirely by South Africa. It is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy headed by the king, with a national legislature [consisting](#) of a 120-member national assembly and a 33-member senate. The country has an extended history of weak political parties and [frequent](#) floor crossings, particularly surrounding elections. It has also experienced pervasive military involvement in politics, with three successful [coups](#), in 1986, 1991, and 1994, and a mutiny in 1998 that led to intervention by South Africa and Botswana under the auspices of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). That said, since the late 1990s, [scholars](#) have noted Lesotho’s marked progress in building democratic institutions, establishing civilian control of the security sector, and reforming the military into a professional force.

Before elections in May 2012, former Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili [defected](#) from his party, the LCD, which had been in power for 15 years, and formed the Democratic Congress (DC). Although Mosisili’s party won a plurality of votes, no party was able to gain a majority, and the DC was left out of the current coalition, which came into office on June 8, 2012. After two fragile years in power, the coalition partners had a falling-out, [reportedly](#) because Thabane was acting unilaterally, refusing to consult other parties on key government appointments. While the parties were attempting to resolve their differences through mediation by the Christian Council of Lesotho, Thabane suspended government for nine months, with the blessing of the king. On June 12, 2014, Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the LCD Mothetjoa Metsing [announced](#) that his party would subsequently pull out of the coalition: “We have decided that we can no longer endure the humiliation that the Honorable Dr. Thabane is inflicting upon the LCD by his unilateral and undemocratic conduct. . . .”

In the midst of this uncertainty, SADC [launched](#) an initiative headed by Namibian President Hifikepunye Pohamba to mediate between the coalition parties and resolve the political crisis. South Africa also publicly communicated [concern](#) regarding the crisis and suspension of parliament. Given Lesotho’s small size and geographic location, South Africa has [historically](#) played a major role in the internal affairs of Lesotho, both politically and militarily. In addition, South Africa has strategic [water](#) resources in Lesotho—in South Africa’s 1998 intervention, [securing](#) the Katse Dam took priority over quelling unrest in the capital. South Africa’s recent statement also brought attention to an underreported (at the time) dimension of the current crisis: the role of the military. “The South African government has further noted with grave concern the unusual movements of the Lesotho Defence Force [LDF] Units in the capital, Maseru,” [read](#) the press release. Going further, South Africa [asserted](#) that it “will not tolerate any unconstitutional change of government in the region and Continent.”

According to a recent [report](#) from the Institute for Security Studies by Peter Fabricius, the “unusual movements” of the LDF resulted from an inter-service rivalry between the police and the army. [Reportedly](#), a police investigation into an attempted bomb attack on the homes of Thabane and the police commissioner in January 2014 revealed that eight military officers were behind the plot. Arrest warrants were issued, but Lieutenant General Tlali Kamoli, the LDF chief, blocked attempts to apprehend the suspects. Kamoli, appointed by former Prime Minister Mosisili, also reportedly has refused to salute the head of government. Fabricius [suggests](#) that Thabane grew to fear Kamoli to the extent that the prime minister requested help from South Africa to prevent a military coup.

While the coalition partners [announced](#) on June 21 they would resolve their differences and remain together through elections in 2017, a compromise agreement was [rejected](#) on July 4 on the grounds that it was too favorable to the LCD. Despite ostensible progress on democratic consolidation and security sector reform in Lesotho over the past decade and a half, the most recent crisis has revealed the persistence of weak parties, unstable civil-military relations, and dangerous rivalries between the police and the army. Regardless of the outcome of the present crisis, any lasting resolution to Lesotho’s political instability must include the strengthening of political parties and efforts to further depoliticize the country’s security sector. Shifting some oversight responsibilities to parliament and enforcing the 1995 defense [policy](#) outlining the apolitical nature of the LDF would be good first steps.

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