C. Usiskin, *America's Covert War in East Africa*. London: Hurst & Co., 2019, 282pp, £17.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeremy H. Keenan

Clara Usiskin's book is a "must-read" for any student of state crime or for anyone perplexed as to why so many people around the world today might wish America harm. Usiskin has played a significant role, for which she is to be praised and thanked, in documenting and exposing the system of rendition, secret detention, targeted killings and the persistent—almost endless—use of torture by the US in its so-called War on Terror (WoT) throughout the greater region of East Africa. Much of the book makes grim reading. It is difficult to understand how a state, claiming 'exceptionalism' by supposed virtue of its liberal values and respect for the 'rule of law', but in practice exceptional through its disregard for human rights, due process and the rule of law, can systemically inflict such appalling abuse, torture and suffering for such extensive durations on mostly innocent victims. One thinks of Stalin's purges and the *Gulag Archipelago*.

Usiskin began working in 2005 for the London-based legal charity Reprieve on cases of prisoners detained in Guantanamo Bay. She soon became interested in the network of other, more secret prisons in which most detainees had been held before arriving at Guantanamo. Her job evolved into investigating the US state's system of extraordinary rendition. Her eight or more years of self-effacing research on the subject provides the basis for this highly detailed and factual account of the WoT and its rendition system in the East and Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean.

Usiskin's book is not intended as an academic security text, for which we should be thankful. It is not cluttered with the theoretical hang-ups of so many academe-based studies on terrorism or the pretentiousness of self-acclaimed "terrorism experts" who simply do not have the author's depth of research experience.

Most of the world's crime is committed by states (Green and Ward 2004), especially when measured in terms of scale and the extent of the harm inflicted on so many innocent victims. Usiskin's research makes an important contribution to our understanding of state crime. Her book has provided us with an insightful understanding and exposé of one of the greatest state crimes of this century, the US' global War on Terror (GWOT). Usiskin's work fills a large regional gap in our understanding of the GWOT. Her research in the East and Horn of Africa complements that in West Africa, North Africa and the Sahel. The current war in the Sahel is a direct outcome of a series of false-flag operations by the US and their Algerian allies from 2003 onwards, that were designed to justify the launch in 2004–5 of another "second front" in the GWOT. Thanks to Usiskin's major contribution, we now have an almost complete geographical picture of how the

GWOT has brought untold death, suffering and hardship to local peoples, especially minority groups, human rights defenders, refugees and displaced persons and, increasingly, the legitimate opponents of the region's many authoritarian regimes that have latched their carts to Washington's call.

The opening chapter describes the extraordinary rendition and almost unbelievable physical and mental torture endured by a Zanzibar man, Suleiman Abdullah, as he is abducted in March 2003 on a street in Mogadishu, shackled and chained to a floor; beaten while hooded, naked and frozen; waterboarded and otherwise abused, before being rendered trussed, blindfolded and usually naked through a network of secret prisons.

For five years, Suleiman was rendered through the US' spider web of secret prisons around East Africa, Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. He knew the prisons only by the names he gave them: "the Darkness", because prisoners were held in constant pitch black; the "Salt Pit" and others. We now know from Suleiman's description and Usiskin's research and analysis that both the "Darkness" and "Salt Pit" were in Afghanistan, where he was rendered from Mogadishu via Nairobi and possibly also Djibouti and Diego Garcia.

Suleiman was finally released in July 2008 and able to return to his wife and daughter, a physically and mentally broken man. After more than five years of such inhuman torture and abuse, Suleiman was found guilty of nothing, except perhaps being in the wrong place or the wrong time or being misidentified through an intelligence system that was as inept, crude and barbaric as that of the Spanish Inquisition. Throughout this period, Suleiman had no access to lawyers, courts or any form of legal protection. To the Americans, none of that mattered: he was the victim of American "exceptionalism".

In 2010, a doctor from the Physicians for Human Rights described Suleiman's clinical evaluation as extremely harrowing. Later, the US Senate Intelligence Committee confirmed that he had been subjected to both authorized and unauthorized enhanced interrogation techniques. Eventually, he became the lead claimant in a landmark US federal court case against James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen, the contract psychologists believed to have designed the CIA interrogation programme. This case, which was settled in favour of the claimants in 2018, was the only legal avenue available to Suleiman in the US. All other cases brought by former CIA prisoners against the CIA directly, or other members of the US administration, have been summarily dismissed, on the basis that even a preliminary examination of the merits would risk the disclosure of state secrets (read "state crimes").

Suleiman's ordeal is just one of many such case studies described by Usiskin. In the second chapter, the author pieces together what is now known of the spider's web of extrajudicial and/or military prisons/black sites used for the detainment and interrogation of the CIA's so-called "high valued detainees" (HVDs).

In many respects, especially to concerned British citizens, the most valuable aspect of this painstaking and meticulous research is Usiskin's investigation into the most controversial of these sites, namely the British island of Diego Garcia in the middle of the Indian Ocean, which the British leased to the US for the construction of what has grown into a significant US military base. Usiskin details not only the UK's illegal treatment of the Chagossians, the indigenous inhabitants of the Chagos Islands (of which Diego Garcia is one), but the complicity of the UK in the use of Diego Garcia in the US rendition programme. Almost as shocking as the author's account of the CIA's rendition programme is her exposé of British duplicity, disingenuousness and complicity in this very dark period of contemporary history.

The value of Usiskin's work goes beyond providing us with an understanding of the role East Africa has played in Washington's global system of extraordinary rendition. Other chapters, because of their thematic and regional specificities, fill particularly important gaps in our understanding of how the US military and its clutter of appendage services have not simply embedded themselves across the continent since the start of the GWOT, but have contributed to the destruction of so many livelihoods, especially of minority peoples, while reinforcing the repressive nature and powers of its many authoritarian regimes.

Chapter 5, for example, reveals how state authorities in East Africa, especially Kenya and Ethiopia, but also Tanzania and Uganda, not to forget Djibouti, the US' largest military base in Africa, have collaborated with the US in the creation of regional counterterrorism policies and procedures. When these are added to what we already know of the US military presence and activities in North, West and Sahelian Africa, the picture of America's militarization of the continent is almost complete. The US military presence and its policies have been a major factor in encouraging greater authoritarian misrule of these states and their regimes' abuse of human rights, due legal process, civil society, the independent media and the democratic process.

The author's comments on the use of drones in targeted killings, notably through the US's use of Djibouti's Camp Lemonier and Chabelley airfield should now be looked at in the context of the largest airbase built by the US outside America, namely the drone base, known as AB201, at Agades in northern Niger, which has just come into operation, giving the US surveillance and strike power into Libya and other parts of North Africa, the Sahel and much of Central Africa.

Chapter 9 on cyber wars, notably the use of surveillance and hacking technologies as tools in counterterrorism, but used more effectively in the control of civil society organizations and legitimate domestic political opposition, also gives a valuable insight into the increased authoritarian misrule in these countries and mirrors the repressive practices of Washington's several other client regimes across the continent.

Usiskin's book is a disturbing and emotive read, but one that is strongly recommended to anyone interested in state crime, the GWOT, rendition, East Africa and American exceptionalism.

Jeremy H. Keenan, Visiting Professor, School of Law, Queen Mary University London.

Reference

Green, P. and Ward, T. (2004) *State Crime: Governments, Violence and Corruption*. London: Pluto Press.