

Somalia: From Stateless Order to Talibanisation?

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Theme: The withdrawal of the Ethiopian troops by the end of January 2009 puts an end to foreign intervention in Somalia.

Summary: Following the withdrawal of the Ethiopian troops from Somalia in January 2009, only a small number of African peacekeepers will be staying in the country waiting for the reinforcement of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) that will probably never take place. Nevertheless, this worrying situation could in fact be a blessing in disguise given the poor record of foreign interventions. This ARI describes the interventions and analyses the reasons why foreign interventions have worsened the internal conflicts by bringing Somalia close to Talibanisation instead of bringing order to the State.

Analysis: By the end of January 2009 Ethiopia had completed the withdrawal of its troops from Somalia, where they had been deployed since the invasion in December 2006. In their place remains a small peacekeeping force, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) under the auspices of the African Union (AU), manned exclusively by troops from Uganda and Burundi. They are likely to become even more unable than in the past to do anything, and the main challenge does indeed seem to have become not getting themselves killed –the most obvious solution to which is to withdraw from Somalia–. A reinforcement of AMISOM with other African troops seems highly unlikely, as even those countries who have previously hinted that they might consider contributing troops continue to procrastinate.

The repeated requests from the AU for reinforcement or replacement by UN peacekeepers, likewise seem unrealistic, as the world organisation cannot dispatch a peace support operation unless member states are willing to provide the requisite troops – something nobody has yet offered to do–. Nor are any other countries likely to do anything significant in a unilateral or even ‘coalition-of-the-willing’ setting. Quite a few nations have sent naval and support forces to patrol Somali waters or to escort (mainly their own) merchant shipping through the pirate-infested Gulf of Aden, but to put forces on the ground –as opposed to hit-and-run attacks against suspected pirates or terrorists– is an entirely different challenge which nobody seems willing to accept.

It thus seems that the Somalis will have to solve their own problems, which might in fact be a blessing in disguise. Looking back at previous interventions in Somali affairs, they have all made matters worse. The Cold War-related interventions by the US and the

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Soviet Union did nothing to prevent the Ogaden War (1977-78) except for ensuring that the level of armaments was high enough to make it more destructive than it would otherwise have been. Similarly, the combined UN/US intervention in the early 1990s did nothing to end the civil war and Somalia was probably in a worse state when the last peacekeepers left the country in 1995 than when they arrived in 1992. Nor have the various small-scale incursions into Somalia by Ethiopia, or any of the US air strikes against suspected terrorists in Somalia, done anything to help the Somalis.

Not only have military interventions thus been unsuccessful, even counter-productive, but the various political attempts by the outside world to restore order and statehood to the stateless Somalia have also backfired. More than a dozen such initiatives have been undertaken since 1995, but none of them have managed to create a government which the citizens of Somalia were prepared to accept as legitimate. The most recent one, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) –a successor to an almost stillborn Transitional National Government, TNG– was the result of mediation efforts by the sub regional organisation IGAD (Inter-Governmental Authority on Development), bringing together the various clans and sub-clans in an intricate power-sharing game, heavily influenced by neighbouring Kenya and Ethiopia. By 2004 the TFG was formally in place, headed by a transitional President, Abdullahi Yusuf (former President of the semi-autonomous Puntland region, a staunch opponent of all brands of Islamism and a reliable ally of Ethiopia). The TFG was flanked by a so-called Transitional Federal Parliament, none of whose members were elected. Unwisely, most of the international community recognised this as a legitimate government, even though it had absolutely no control over the country. Indeed, for most of its existence it has been located in Kenya rather than in Somalia itself. Only when the Ethiopians –in violation of the UN arms embargo– provided troops for its protection did the TFG relocate to Somalia (to the provincial town Baidoa) and only after a fully-fledged Ethiopian invasion did they dare set foot in the capital, Mogadishu. The fact that the TFG had been internationally recognised even provided a legal fig-leaf for the Ethiopian invasion, which was formally undertaken at the request of the country's legitimate government.

The Outcomes of Foreign Intervention in Somalia

What external political and military intervention has taken place has, at most, been 'government without governance'. The existence of such a 'quasi-state' may be convenient for the so-called international community which does, for instance, need the formal approval of a Somali government to enter Somali territory in pursuit of pirates or terrorists. However, it does nothing for the Somali population except providing a fig-leaf of legality for what is not viewed by the population as legitimate, such as air strikes or other military ventures which invariably also produced civilian casualties.

'But what is the alternative?' is an obvious question from any observers in western (and other) countries, accustomed to equating governance with government and therefore predisposed to view statelessness as anarchy or chaos. As convincingly argued by Ken Menkhaus and others, however, even in the absence of a state with a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, societies can experience an order of sorts, ie 'governance without government'.¹

¹ Kent Menkhaus (2006), 'Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping', *International Security*, vol. 31, nr 3, p. 74-106.

One of the central institutions in Somali societies is the clan –subdivided into clan families, clans and sub-clans– to which the vast majority of the population belong in a sense that matters to the individuals concerned. Clan affiliation provides a certain economic ‘safety net’ as other clan members acknowledge the obligation to help their kin in need; and a form of ‘security by deterrence’, based on centuries-old rules for collective revenge or its functional equivalent, the payment of *diya*. Feuds certainly do erupt, but they are usually laid to rest again through negotiations between traditional clan authorities. Another institution is the *bazaar*, ie, the business community. The Somalis are widely known as entrepreneurs, eager to make money, which usually requires a degree of stability and predictability, whereas chaos is usually (although not always) bad for business. Hence, whoever is able to ensure law and order can usually count on the support of the *bazaar*. A third institution is the shared religion of virtually all Somalis, Islam, and the various courts established in its name to administer *shari’a*, ie, Islamic law.

Contrary to widespread misunderstandings, the traditional Somali variety of Islam is a moderate and basically apolitical form of Sufism, whereas the Wahhabism dominant in Saudi Arabia has generally been anathema to the Somalis. Hence, militant and ‘jihadist’ ideologies such as those inflaming al-Qaeda supporters have not really had much appeal in Somalia. This is, for instance, apparent from the reports to the al-Qaeda leadership from an operative dispatched to Somalia during the civil war in the early 90s and recently published by the US Military Academy at West Point.² Nor did indigenous militants such as the *Al Ittihad Al Islamiyya* (AIAI, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-Ikhwan*) fare much better in those turbulent years. They created a militia, scored some short-lived and local military victories, and were then defeated. The last anyone heard of them until around 2006 was limited to a couple of minor terrorist attacks in Ethiopia.

Only in 2006 did the AIAI and Islamism in general experience a certain renaissance. In the meantime, a plenitude of *shari’a* courts had sprung up around the country, mainly on a local and often on a clan basis and in some cases with militias attached to them –simply functional substitutes for state-based law enforcement agencies, now dealing not merely (as had previously been the case) with family law, but also with criminal law–. What prompted these decentralised and apolitical institutions to unite and seek political control was an, even by US standards, singularly clumsy attempt by the US government to muster support for its War on Terror. In February 2006, US agents were seen handing out packages of dollar bills to various warlords, in Mogadishu and elsewhere, in order to entice them to join a so-called Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), the immediate aim of which was to help apprehend a couple of suspected terrorists with some alleged presumed connections to the attacks against the US embassies in Nairobi and Daar Es Salaam in August 1998, presumed to now be hiding in Somalia.

This almost immediately led to the formation of a Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which had by June of the same year managed to defeat the ARPCT and establish control over the country –the TFG remaining in complete passivity–. The following six months were, according to most accounts, the most peaceful and stable since the civil war. The UIC made the business community decommission many of the private militias, whose services they had made use of until then, to have the harbours and airport re-opened for business and even managed to suppress the pirates.

² Harmony Project (2007), *Al Qaeda’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa*, Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY.

Sometimes the Remedy is Worse than the Illness

Unfortunately, the UIC did not really succeed in establishing clear chains of command in its own ranks, allowing various self-proclaimed leaders and spokesmen to ostensibly act and speak on its behalf –among whom was a former military commander of the AIAI, Sheikh Aways–. Not only his rise to prominence, but also some of the hostile rhetoric of other UIC spokesmen and, even more so, the pledges of support to rebel groups fighting against the government of Ethiopia (eg, the Oromo Liberation Front, OLF, and the Ogaden National Liberation Front, ONLF) served to incur the wrath of the big neighbour. Hence the Ethiopian (*de facto*) invasion in late December 2006, which had undoubtedly been ‘cleared’ with the US in advance.

Rather than putting up a regular fight against the militarily superior invader in the streets of Mogadishu and other major towns, as had been feared, the UIC immediately disbanded and continued the struggle as a combination of guerrilla warfare and terrorism –in turn ‘forcing’ the Ethiopian troops to wage a very dirty counter-insurgency war, eg, with indiscriminate shelling of residential areas–. Whereas the Ethiopian forces succeeded in installing, at long last, the TFG in (what was left of) the government buildings, even with this very heavy-handed assistance, the regime of Abdullahi Yusuf and his entourage remained completely incapable of governing anything. Most of the security forces that were trained by the Ethiopians (with some UN support) deserted to the resistance upon completion of their training and receipt of their weapons, warlordism spread again as did piracy, and an unknown number of foreign ‘jihadists’ seemed to have followed the call of al-Qaeda’s leader al-Zawahiri to fight the infidels in Somalia.

This caused extreme misery for the unfortunate civilian population, giving rise to what has been called the worst humanitarian crisis on the entire continent, featuring huge numbers of internally displaced persons and refugees, widespread malnutrition and even starvation and the spread of diseases. But it also both strengthened and radicalised the resistance. However much the Somalis had previously rejected the Wahhabist strands of Islam, they now rapidly gained ground. Even more ominously, Wahhabism was personified not so much by the relatively moderate and non-militant AIAI as by the previously almost unknown ultra-militant *Al-Shabaab* (‘Youth’) militia, which has engaged in many acts that clearly warrant the label of ‘terrorism’, eg, deliberate attacks against Red Cross targets. It did not really help that on 1 May 2008 the US succeeded in killing the *Al-Shabaab* leader Aden Hashi Ayro with a missile strike. Rather, it seemed to have confirmed the insurgents’ impression that they were up against a general western conspiracy against Islam. Moreover, the Islamist/Jihadist insurgents seem to have succeeded in merging in people’s minds their national struggle of resistance against the foreign occupants with a struggle for Islam, including the rigid versions thereof which had previously not enjoyed any major support from the Somali people. That *Al-Shabaab* had by early 2009 established effective control over most of the country should thus not automatically be taken as evidence of any thorough islamisation of the population. Even without widespread public support, however, it is quite conceivable that *Al-Shabaab* will attempt what might be called the ‘Talibanisation’ of Somalia.

Conclusion

Guidelines for a Potential Way Out to the Somali Conflict

Fortunately, however, 'Talibanisation' is unlikely to succeed. If the Islamists moderate their religious zeal and focus on *dawa*, ie, patient and peaceful attempts at converting their fellow countrymen, they will surely find this next to impossible –also because the departure of the hated Ethiopians will work against framing the religious struggle as one for national liberation–. If they proceed with an attempt to Islamise Somalia by force, they are almost bound to provoke a reaction. The previously moribund TFG may have been given a new lease of life. Not only has its parliamentary wing granted (with some international approval) itself and the TFG a new two-year term. It has also co-opted one faction of the former UIC, now renamed the ARS (Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia) and appointed one of its leading figures, Sheikh Sharrif, as the successor to the utterly compromised Yusuf as President. This has met with international approval, even that of the West which had belatedly come to realise that a functioning government would need legitimacy in the eyes of the Somalis. The new transitional President's Islamic credentials are beyond reproach, which in itself will de-legitimise the *al-Shabaab* opposition, especially if a compromise is reached between his faction of ARS and that of Sheikh Aways –a former patron of *Al-Shabaab*–.

Should the two of them join forces and make sure they retain a reasonable balance between the various clans –especially not alienating the Haweye clans who have traditionally controlled Mogadishu–, then they might be able to reign in the unruly *al-Shabaab* and establish a modicum of order. Not in all of Somalia, however, as the North-Western part –ie the former British Somaliland– will stick to the independence it declared in 1991 and has upheld ever since, albeit without international recognition and not in the autonomous North-Eastern region of Puntland, which might even formally declare independence. But perhaps it could gain control in the central and southern parts of the country.

Such a reasonably happy ending might, however, presuppose that the rest of the world abstains from intervening. Ethiopia should stop meddling in south-central Somali affairs and only politically and economically support Somaliland and Puntland. Eritrea should terminate its proxy warfare against Ethiopia in the form of support for the Aways faction of ARS and *Al-Shabaab*. The US should refrain from its anyhow futile military hunt for terrorist suspects in Somalia. International organisations –IGAD, the AU and the UN– should withdraw their remaining troops (which are in any case not up to job) and only redeploy them when a genuinely all-inclusive government of national unity is in place, suspend their recognition of the TFG and only lift the suspension if or when the TFG has received genuine democratic legitimation through elections.

This is unlikely to happen soon, but one of the most important lessons of the past is to surely refuse premature diplomatic recognition. In the short term, the international community, including all of the above, is morally obliged to help mitigate the humanitarian catastrophe they have contributed to bring about, mainly by providing shelter to the Somali refugees until the situation in their homeland allows their safe repatriation, and by providing emergency relief to the suffering civilian population.

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