

Somalia in the Crosshairs

By Najum Mushtaq | February 1, 2007

After the swift fall of Somalia's Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in December 2006, the capital city of Mogadishu has slid back into the familiar, 15-year-old state of violence and lawlessness. The ICU, an alliance of clan-based *Sharia* courts run by clergy, took control from the transitional government and held much of Somalia's central and southern territories until its recent defeat by Ethiopian-backed forces. Even as the invading Ethiopian forces prepare to withdraw, faced with a resentful civilian population and increasing attacks by 'unknown' gunmen, the U.S.-backed transitional government is not any closer to gaining public acceptance or control than it was when its forces were defeated by Islamic militias in June 2006. The interim government's task is made doubly difficult by intermittent U.S. air strikes and the hunting of al-Qaida suspects in tandem with local warlords and Ethiopian forces, which reinforce the Somali people's antipathy toward the United States and its Somali protégés. Plans for an African Union peacekeeping force, to be taken over eventually by the UN, are faltering as most regional countries remain reluctant to send their soldiers to a country reeling from 16 years of civil war.

Policy Myopia

Much of Somalia's woes are the result of U.S. policy myopia since the end of the Cold War. Though the disastrous 1992 "humanitarian" intervention resulted in a formal posture of disengagement from the internecine Somali conflict, Washington has not made any secret of its preference for those warlords who oppose the Islamic movement. Opposition to Somalia's Islamic movements was the defining factor in the shifting of local, regional, and international allegiances in the 1990s. For instance, the same warlords who had run off the U.S. forces after the famous "Black Hawk Down" episode in 1993 later became America's favorites in 1995, when Al-Ittehad's militia unsuccessfully

launched an offensive to take over Mogadishu after occupying some marginal areas.

The George W. Bush administration's Somalia policy, too, has been consistently dictated by an exaggerated fear of al-Qaida's strength in Somalia, leading it to equate the indigenous Somali Islamic courts with the global network of terrorism. That Somalia is the only African country in which virtually all the population is Muslim and no central authority has existed since 1991 contributes to an overzealous military approach to tackling the perceived al-Qaida threat.

Understandably then, the recent U.S.-sponsored victory over the Islamic courts had induced a sense of triumph in the Bush administration,

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leading to a direct intervention and a more active diplomatic role. Washington followed Ethiopia's military work with aerial bombings and strengthening the sea cordon around the Somali coast. In early January, Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer toured the region to rally regional powers to discuss the way ahead. "There may be—for the first time, in a long time—a slim cause for hope in this long-suffering country," opined a policy paper from the American Enterprise Institute, a neo-conservative-affiliated think tank and one of the more influential sources of policy input that the Bush administration pays heed to ("Ethiopia Versus the Islamists," January 8, 2007). Similarly, a January 2007 paper published by the hawkishly neoconservative Center for Security Policy lauds Ethiopia's unilateral invasion for "eliminating a terrorist threat" and urges the Bush administration that the country "must not again be permitted to become a terrorist haven" (Paul B. Henze, "Ethiopia and Somalia").

Perhaps grasping the downward slide of current U.S. intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, neo-conservative think tanks and experts—intent on opening new fronts for an already thinly stretched U.S. military—summarily reject parallels between those countries and Somalia. Somalia, the thinking goes, is not Iraq or Afghanistan, and an indigenous insurgency there is unlikely. In other words, the costs of U.S. military strikes and pursuit of al-Qaida will be less compared to the other two hot fronts in the war on terrorism.

Why is Somalia Important?

This ideological policy input in Washington strikes a resonant chord with Somalia's

neighbors, especially Ethiopia and Kenya, who are grappling with the fallout of the 16-year-old Somali conflict. With a coastline longer than any other African country's, running the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean, Somalia's strategic location places it at the center of regional geopolitics. This central position is reinforced by the fact that the Somalis are a transnational ethnic group, with sizeable population in neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa. Somali refugees are also spread around the region, particularly in Kenya. More than 150,000 Somali refugees are living in Kenyan camps, and thousands more are scattered around that country. The rise of the Islamic Courts Union in 2006 and the emerging possibility of a hostile, fundamentalist central government in Mogadishu caused regional tensions and spurred a competition for influence.

Moreover, the ideological coloring of the conflict is sharpened by the religious and tribal divides in Ethiopia, where the ruling clique belongs to a minority tribe. The government of Mele Zenawi has been consistently at odds with its Oromo and Ogaden population, the latter region being inhabited by Ethiopian-Somali Muslims and a bitter opponent of Ethiopian rule.

Another significant factor in the U.S. decision to go after the ICU and kill whomever from al-Qaida may be in their refuge might have been the rhetorical pronouncements of support from Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The message from bin Laden welcomed last year's takeover of Mogadishu by the ICU; this year his deputy released an audiotape inciting jihad after the defeat of the Islamic militia. These messages reinforced America's fear of al-Qaida's Somalia link and helped to

exaggerate the level of terrorism threat from Somalia's Islamic courts.

Internal Tribal Politics

Other than the above sources that might be informing U.S. policy—the neoconservative intelligentsia, Somali warlords, and Somalia's neighbors with a vested interest—there seems to be little independent input from the ground. It is generally ignored that clan affiliation in Somalia is stronger and more decisive than ideological agendas. There also seems to be a tendency to describe a single region of the country and portray it as Somalia.

What is generally referred to as Somalia these days is in fact the south-central region. In terms of political administration, the country is divided into three units: the two autonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland, and south-central Somalia. The last region includes the historical capital city of Mogadishu, most of the strategically vital ports, and some of the more dominant clans. It is largely inhabited by sub-groups of the Hawiye clan, whose militias were also dominant in the ICU. Most of the top ICU leaders are from Hawiye sub-clans. It is the south-central region that fell into the hands of the Islamic militia; Puntland and Somaliland remained fiercely resistant to the ICU's expansion.

The influence of the Islamic Courts was mostly restricted to the Hawiye tribes and some sub-clans of the Darood, Isak, and Rahanweyn tribes. The transitional government, on the other hand, is led and dominated by the Darood clan. Only one Hawiye sub-clan, known as Sa'ad, rejected the ICU and fought against it. It is this sub-clan that is now in ascendancy

once again. The most immediate and dangerous threat to the whole country is resumption of warfare along clan/sub-clan lines. The weakness of the transitional government also means that local warlords are reassuming control of their respective areas and are back in business as usual.

It would be simplistic, therefore, to approach the brewing conflict in the Horn solely from the perspective of America's post-9/11 war on terrorism. There are many layers to the present chaos in the region. Religious radicalism is but one aspect of the turmoil that seems to engulf Somalia into protracted warfare. Ethnic, tribal, and religious rivalries within the many East African states have transformed into interstate conflicts, which are now spilling over far beyond the region, gaining an international dimension because of the tenuous al-Qaida connection.

Way Forward

Washington's inordinate focus and disproportionate use of force to decimate a few al-Qaida suspects hinders, rather than facilitates, the way forward on Somalia. At a time when the interim government needed a forceful push to initiate a dialogue with all stakeholders and clan leaders, the United States has marginalized a legitimate political actor in the form of the ICU. Not only does the ICU have roots in a major clan and sympathizers in other clans, but the Islamic movement also wields considerable influence among the Somali diaspora, whose financial and political backing will be critical to any process of rebuilding state structures and restoring normality.

Regardless of the composition of any future peacekeeping forces, and no matter how hard the United States keeps hitting so-called al-Qaida hideouts, the conflict in Somalia cannot be resolved unless all factions of the Somali people are engaged in a process to negotiate and agree upon a future political course. Violence, U.S. aerial strikes, and Ethiopia's land invasion have so far only bred more violence.

Bringing peace about requires embarking on a more democratic path of reconciliation in a society undone and ripped apart by an interminable civil war.

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