

State Failure in Somalia

Causes of Instability and Insecurity

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Due to the absence of an effective central government and the high intensity of violence and corruption, Somalia tops the list of failed states. For several years in a row, Transparency International and *Foreign Policy* consider Somalia to be the most corrupt and failed state in the world.¹ In fact, it is *The Economist's* prediction, published in *The World in 2010*, that Somalia will be the worst country on earth this year.² Indeed, in its present state, it is not difficult to foresee a grim future for this nation.

Much of our attention is being drawn to current threats of piracy and radical extremism in Somalia. However, in a letter to *The Times*, Somali Prime Minister Omar Abdirashid Sharmarke states: "Piracy and the growth of Islamic extremism are not the natural state of being. They are but symptoms of an underlying malaise – the absence of government and hope."³ Indeed, the malaise is alarming. Continuous fighting, drought, food insecurity and lack of healthcare have severely dislocated society. Over a million people are internally displaced and hundreds of thousands have sought refuge elsewhere, often living under deplorable conditions. The unfolding humanitarian crisis is one of the worst in present times.

To explore the causes of the humanitarian crisis and the threats to international security, parallels must be drawn to the contemporary history and clan structure of Somalia. Frequent political changes and the prevailing of clan interests in society over national interests preconditioned the current *status quo*.

What follows below is an outline of the sequence of events that led to the present cycle of instability and insecurity. It provides a short commentary on the contemporary history, with a focus on the transient nature of Somali politics, interests and the clan-based society. It briefly addresses the opportunities that gave rise to the aforementioned 'symptoms', i.e. the current threats to international security. Subsequently, it discusses the requirements

for peace and the necessity of a constructive commitment of the international community.

50 Years of Conflict

Since its independence and the unification of British and Italian Somaliland in 1960, the Republic of Somalia has been torn by conflict. At the onset, an unequally high representation of southerners in government, the civil service and the armed forces caused an imbalanced distribution of development and economic wealth, which eventually led to loss of support for the democratic union among the different clans. Instability was fuelled by corruption, nepotism and inter-clan rivalries.

A military regime, led by Major General Siad Barre, took power in a coup d'état in October 1969 and proclaimed a socialist state. Initial successes in state reforms and development of education, infrastructure and the economy soon were overshadowed by human rights abuses and other violent means of exercising state control.⁴ To solidify its position, the autocratic regime manipulated territorial inequalities and clan repressions, which in turn gave rise to the formation of organised rebel movements in the northwest and south of the country. Violent resistance was met with communal punishment, which strengthened the clan-based membership of the regime and insurgent groups alike.⁵



By the 1990s, government institutions had deteriorated in power and control. The army split up into opposing factions and after an intensive fight with insurgents Siad Barre fled the capital, Mogadishu, marking the collapse of central authority in 1991.⁶ Consequently, the country found itself in a full-fledged civil war, with widespread famine, displacements and violent atrocities as a result. In the absence of national defence and police forces, civilians mobilised local militia in order to defend and protect clan interests.⁷ Similarly, Islamic courts were established on the local level to provide for law and justice in the chaos that followed the collapse. This, however, gave rise to Islamist insurgent movements seeking to expand their influence. The Salafist movement Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiyya (AIAI) is perhaps the most notorious group of the 1990s, with its Jihadist ideology and alleged links to Al-Qaeda.

Efforts of National and International Engagement

In response to the ongoing drought and the increasing famine, the United Nations authorised the peacekeeping United Nations Mission in Somalia (UNOSOM) I. The mission was mandated to monitor the fragile ceasefire that was brokered by the UN in March 1992 between the leading Mogadishu clans. However, even when the weak mandate was extended beyond the borders of the capital and now included more elaborate force protection elements and a

provision of free passage for humanitarian assistance, implementation of the mission proved difficult.⁸ Under the auspices of the United Nations, the United States entered the stage in December 1992 with a coalition to secure an environment for the delivery of humanitarian aid. Yet, as violence escalated and now turned against the intervention forces, the Unified Task Force (UNITAF) and its successor UNOSOM II withdrew from Somalia in 1993 and 1995 respectively without the restoration of order.

Numerous peace and reconciliation efforts were made between 1990 and 2004, both within and outside of Somalia. High-level international conferences in Djibouti (1991), Addis Ababa (1993), Cairo (1997) and Eldoret (2002) resulted in renewed agreements and governments, each failing subsequently. Concurrently, Somaliland in the northwest (1991), Puntland in the northeast and to a lesser extent Jubaland in the southwest (both in 1998) proclaimed their independence and generally did not recognise new governments of unity. The lack of consensus and continuous fighting between the different clans undermined unification and accelerated the unfolding humanitarian crisis.

In 2004 the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was established following a two-year peace process, hosted by the government of Kenya and brokered by the Eastern African 'Intergovernmental Authority on Development' (IGAD). More successful than its

Analysis

predecessors, the TFG attempted to reinstate governmental and juridical institutions and gained short-lived popular support. Its tasks to restore order and bring peace to this troubled country have yet to be accomplished. The TFG also proved to be a fragile alliance, prone to internal strifes and clan interests. Although it enjoys international support from the United Nations, the African Union (AU), the IGAD and a number of (especially Western) nations, politically, the TFG struggles for national recognition and physical control over Somali territories.

Internal Power Struggles and the Islamic Courts Union

Even before its establishment there have been a number of influential factions in Somalia posing serious challenges to the new transitional government. During its first years this was most notably the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), created in 1984. The ICU was initially formed by the religious leaders of 11 Islamist courts, with strongholds particularly in the Mogadishu area. Many of its leaders had roots in the Al-Itihaad Al-Islamiyya and belonged to the same clan.

The partnership was a loose coalition of progressive, conservative and opportunist Islamists and the views of its leaders varied greatly in terms of political objective as well as religion.⁹ The general aim of the ICU was to create an Islamic state based on Sharia law in the Horn of Africa. It organised militia to enforce its laws and counter warlords and the TFG in its areas of operation. Even though its methods remain controversial, the ICU established itself as the legitimate authority in its areas of control. Although the local population was critical of the coercive enforcement of its ideology, the restoration of order was perceived as a step forward. The ICU reached out to the international community to gain legitimacy, but apart from support of a number of Arab nations, the ICU was soon designated as a radical extremist movement.

In an attempt to undermine the increasing power of the courts, prominent businessmen and politicians (including members of the TFG) got organised in a Western-backed Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT), portraying the ICU as a terrorist organisation. However, the announcement of its intentions resulted in violent confrontations between the two movements.

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The clashes lasted for four months in what was later referred to as “the Battle for Mogadishu.” Eventually, the Islamic Courts Union proved its supremacy and the ARPCT dissolved after a short-lived existence, with several members joining the ICU. The defeat paved the way for the ICU to regain considerable control over Mogadishu and expand its influence in the hinterland. By late 2006, the ICU controlled most of Central and South Somalia.

The Intervention of Ethiopia

Concerned with the increasing influence of the ICU and a likely destabilisation of the contested border region of Ogadan, the Ethiopian government responded to the request of the Transitional Federal Government to intervene and launched a major assault against the ICU in December 2006. The offensive was short and decisive, as the Ethiopian military troops greatly outnumbered the ICU forces. Soon, moderate members of the ICU went into exile in Djibouti and Eritrea, whereas more radical members remained in Somalia to form new insurgency movements. Ethiopian forces would continue to be deployed in Somalia, until an international peace support operation would take over. Providing military assistance and protection to the TFG, the Ethiopian forces were able to create only small pockets of security. The security vacuum that came into existence as a result of the ICU’s removal from power in 2006 gave rise to a number of new armed movements. Fighting continued between TFG and Ethiopian forces and opposing groups.

African Union Deploys Peacekeeping Forces

More than 10 years after the withdrawal of the international peacekeeping intervention forces and after extensive political consultation processes, the African Union deployed a peace support operation in Somalia (AMISOM) in January 2007. The mission was endorsed by the UN Security Council and was established to provide security support to the TFG as well as to contribute to the creation of favourable conditions for dialogue, reconciliation and the provision of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰

Until today the mission remains unable to fulfil its broad mandate. In addition to the extremely difficult conditions it has to operate in, AMISOM suffers from poor institutional competence, lack of resources, funds and troop contributions, and remains highly dependent on assistance from outside organisations. The intended (and insufficient) capacity of 8,000 civilian and military peacekeepers was never reached and today there are just 5,000 Ugandan and Burundian troops on the ground.¹¹ Nonetheless, in January 2009 Ethiopia gradually started its withdrawal, concluding its direct involvement in Somalia. The intention of the UN to take over the mission after the first six months never took shape and recently the Security Council authorised the extension of the current AMISOM mission until January 2011.¹²



Reconciliation?

In June 2008, a UN-backed ceasefire and power-sharing agreement was brokered between the TFG and the ICU in exile, now called the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS). Members of the ARS became part of the TFG – almost doubling the number of members of the transitional parliament – and its leader, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, became President of the TFG in January 2009. These moves brought a more equal balance among the clan representatives in the TFG, even though size and diversity of the TFG restricted its effectiveness. In order for the transitional government to gain legitimacy, the greatest political challenge the new president is facing now is to reconcile with local clans as well as with the semi-autonomous states of Somaliland and Puntland. Meanwhile, the main security threat to the TFG had shifted from the ICU to other radical movements.

Current Security Threats

At present, the two strongest and most notorious Islamist movements countering the TFG are Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam. The first owes its origin to the ICU as its youth wing, but is now considered to be a hard-line breakaway group. The latter merged from four smaller movements into an unstable coalition that announced to fight the TFG and Ethiopian troops. The movements are actively

confronting the TFG with violent attacks against government and AMISOM strongholds. Rural and urban communities that are at the centre stage of the fighting often change hands between the warring factions. Both Islamist groups have been added to the U.S. terrorist watch list and are of increasing concern to the international community.

The number of fighters within the movements is relatively high, as membership appeals to many of the young men with little alternative prospects. Al-Shabaab, attracting both Somali and foreign fighters, also recruits among the vast Somali Diaspora in the U.S., Europe and Australia, seeking to extend its influence in neighbouring countries. In February this year, Al-Shabaab announced its allegiance with Al-Qaeda, stating that the jihad of the Horn of Africa would join the international Al-Qaeda-led network.¹³

Most of the impoverished southeast is now under direct control of Islamist movements such as the above, attacking local warlords, banning aid workers, and implementing its harsh perceptions of Sharia law. Not only does Al-Shabaab's influence undermine the legitimacy of the TFG, its control over large parts of Somali territory (as potential breeding grounds for terrorism) and confirmed links to international terrorist networks are seen as immediate threats to international security.¹⁴



In the north of Somalia, other insecurities prevail. Over recent years, the increase in piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden has attracted wide international attention. Piracy off the Somali coast is not a new phenomenon, nor are the pirate groups operating in these waters. However, the recent increase in piracy activity from sporadic maritime pillaging and ransoming to the hundreds of attacks in recent years could be explained as an opportunistic response to the political transition, particularly in Somaliland and Puntland.¹⁵ Local factions that competed for control over maritime resources when Barre's monopoly ceased to exist in 1991, now have interests in both foreign trawling and piracy activities. Deprived from their normal livelihood, fishermen see opportunity to resort to piracy in the absence of law enforcement. Pirates and their onshore counterparts have flourished from this lucrative industry, exhibiting their wealth from the coastline of Somalia to the hills of Nairobi. So far, the international response has been limited to combating these symptoms in a one million square miles stretch of ocean.

Somalia: At a Cross-roads

As its history demonstrates, Somali society is diverse and often divided. Its clan structure dominates society and determines how Somalis relate to one another as well as to foreign entities. Political and armed movements are often built around a clan or

clan family. Society allows certain mobility within and between such movements, particularly when these movements become larger or develop into new movements. A clan movement can eventually encompass an entire clan family. Religious movements, on the other hand, supersede this division and, to a certain extent, indirectly promote cohesion between clans and clan families. At the same time, religious movements may undermine civil society, which affects the clan structure. While some religious movements brought order and stability, in general, living conditions worsened for local Somalis. Although these movements promote a religious association – as Sufi and Salafist movements are both present among the largely Sunni majority – many of its followers are opportunists, merely trying to break away from poverty. If the security and livelihood of the local population improve, it is likely that a decrease in control and influence of Islamist groups can be observed.

Pursuing these goals, the TFG, with President Sheikh Sharif representing the 'missing' clan, could still be a solution for national unity, were it not for the weak cohesion of its parliament and institutions and its divided members. Therefore, to improve unity within and encourage firm action of the TFG is the first hurdle to overcome. When considered more favourably, of all 14 governments since the collapse of the regime in 1991, the TFG has been able to remain in existence for six years until now.

Analysis

Regionally, an important step for Somalia is the improvement of relations with its neighbours, most notably Ethiopia. The two nations have been at war on several occasions, but basically share the same interests in regional stability and economic prosperity. Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea and the Arabian Peninsula are divided in their support of the movements in Somalia, which has been demonstrated by numerous non-productive regional conferences and failed attempts to peaceful reconciliations. However, regional political and economic cooperation can only be achieved when the TFG has affirmed its position to act as a regional political partner.

Finally, on an international level, Somalia is on the brink of becoming a pariah state if it does not adequately address transnational security threats. This is, however, an impossible task for the weak TFG, and as it is of equal importance to the international community, extensive involvement is required that goes beyond naval patrolling and counterterrorism operations. To date, international involvement has been limited and has often been counter-productive. Both the Ethiopian invasion and American military engagements have had adverse effects. Similarly, humanitarian organisations are present on a large scale in Somalia, but struggle to operate in an environment without sufficient international security assistance. Past and present peacekeeping missions have been ill-equipped and have not been able to render the necessary support.

State-building in Somalia can only be successful by implementing a comprehensive approach based on a strong security and development policy. The Somali government needs to take full ownership of building the institutional capacity of the state, albeit with considerable attention to local interests and the clan structure. Full commitment of the international community is required for the provision of humanitarian aid, development and security support throughout this process. In his letter to *The Times* (mentioned in the introduction) the Somali Prime Minister in fact already made this appeal: "The help we need is first in the restoration of both effective government and the training of national security forces required to secure peace and enforce laws. Second, in restoring and enforcing Somalia's economic exclusion zone so that Somalia can use its vast potential wealth in fish, oil and gas to fund its own future. [...] [T]hird, in launching a large-scale civil affairs programme to train our young people and establish legitimate commercial livelihoods."

Civilians have mobilised local militia to defend clan interests

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