Stabilizing Somalia: A New Approach to State-Building

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Introduction

The situation in the East African nation of Somalia is currently synonymous with the definition of state failure. Since 1991, the country has been ripped apart by a destructive cocktail of anarchy, violence, famine, and greed. Seventeen years later, the situation appears to be growing even worse. While piracy runs rampant off the Horn of Africa, the most fanatical wing of Somalia’s Islamist insurgency, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), has seized physical control of the majority of the country and is poised to completely topple the impotent United States and Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), established in 2004. Now, the possibility arises that the ICU could open up Somalia’s borders even further to allow in radical militants from Somalia’s neighboring Islamic regions. The TFG – a government which has no legitimacy or respect from the Somali populace and effectively controls only a few city blocks – is likely to collapse in the similar fashion of thirteen previous transitional governments since 1991. The active US support of the TFG and its bold counterterrorism initiatives in the country since 2006 have led to levels of anti-American sentiment not felt in Somalia since the early 1990s. Somalia’s instability and lawlessness pose dire security threats to her neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa as well as to the US and its global war on terror (GWOT). A comprehensive solution rooted in counterinsurgent, counterterrorist, and state-building political theory is necessary if Somalia is to emerge as a functioning society in the new millennium.
Overview – Somalia in the 1990s

In order to better comprehend the security threats posed by Somalia’s total state failure, a brief review of recent Somali history and external intervention must be provided. Somalia has been in severe turmoil since its disastrous defeat at the hands of Ethiopia in the Ogaden War of 1977-78. However, the real catastrophe arrived in 1991, with the violent coup that overthrew the regime of clan leader Mohammed Siad Barre. This occurred in the midst of a civil war already underway for three years between rival ruling clan factions. After the fall of the government the situation continued to deteriorate, especially in southern Somalia, where an economy of plunder and violent banditry took hold. Accompanying the brutal violence was a devastating famine brought on by drought, which ultimately led to the deaths of approximately 250,000 Somalis. The overall legacy of the civil war is profound as well: deep inter-clan grievances over atrocities committed, massive amounts of stolen property, the looting of all public goods, and the near-universal spread of arms. On a broader scale, the war led to the destruction of much of the capital city of Mogadishu, the rise of warlords with vested interest in lawlessness, unresolved secession in the north, and the flight of a million Somalis abroad. Attempts to resurrect a Somali state effectively began from rubble.

November of 1992 marks the first instance of international intervention with the announcement by the United States that it would “forge a new world order” by leading a multi-national peace enforcement operation in Somalia aimed at facilitating humanitarian aid. The operation aimed to accomplish this by locating, seizing, and effectively ousting the ruling warlord, Mohammed Farrah Aideed, who was diverting foreign aid into his own pocket. Joining in the stability effort was a host of other United Nations member
states, together forming the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), which took over in 1993. The peace building initiative quickly plunged into crisis, facing frequent attacks by heavily armed Somali clan-based militias in the lawless streets of Mogadishu. The moment that now best defines the failure of the mission was the Black Hawk Down incident in October 1993, in which 18 US Army Rangers and over 1,500 Somalis were killed in a two-day raging battle in the streets of Mogadishu. Somalis had long perceived the US and UN forces as foreign occupiers, but Black Hawk Down served to harden American public opinion against the intervention, leading President Bill Clinton to announce withdrawal by the end of March 1994. UNOSOM soon followed suit, disbanding completely by March 1995, leaving Somalia in a state of war and total state collapse. UNOSOM’s failure proved to many that the entire enterprise of reviving failed states was a futile one.

The Case for Somali Terrorism

Ever since the terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001, the Horn of Africa, and Somalia particularly, has been singled out by US counterterrorism officials as a potential haven for Islamic terrorists to plan and carry out attacks against the US, its allies, and points of US interest. An April 2004 intelligence report explained that “Although we are concerned about attacks everywhere in Africa, we consider East Africa and the Horn…to be at particular risk.” Somalia’s status as a failed state has led experts to believe that Al-Qaeda and similar terrorist groups under siege in the war on terror could potentially enter through its porous borders and relocate there. Once inside, these groups could conceal themselves amidst the chaos and become impossible to locate due to the country’s dearth
of security services and intelligence networks. Adding to this threat is the lack of transparency in financial transactions that are carried out in failed states, making it easier for terrorists to launder money and facilitate a global arms trade without it becoming traceable.  

Nodes and Hubs

Terrorism emanating from failed states is a unique brand. Thomas Dempsey, a Gulf War veteran and government intelligence analyst for Africa, seeks to explain this specific model by differentiating between two types of cells: terrorist nodes and terrorist hubs. Terrorist nodes are “small, closely knit local cells that actually commit terrorist acts in the areas in which they are active.” Terrorist hubs “provide ideological guidance, financial support, and access to resources enabling node attacks,” in the form of funneling money and arms to nodes residing inside and outside of the failed state. In the hub-node model, Dempsey explains that hubs provide centralized direction and communication linkages among nodes that are decentralized and geographically distributed as independent teams. Al-Qaeda, in response to the GWOT, has moved away from central direction and planning towards decentralized, self-directed operations carried out by hidden nodes, but assisted and ideologically driven by regional hubs, such as the one believed to be operating in Somalia.

Despite the ominous predictions of government counterterrorist officials, Somalia has not become the international terrorist haven expected in the years following 9/11. In reality, it serves more as a transit point. Dr. Ken Menkhaus, a political science professor and noted expert on Somalia, explains that, ironically, lawlessness and violence are so
rampant in Somalia that it is not an acceptable safe haven even for terrorist groups. This fact rings especially true when Somalia’s notorious mistrust and violent hostility to foreigners is taken into account.

However, that is not to say that terrorism emanating from Somalia has been completely absent in Africa, pre and post-9/11. On the contrary, a variety of attacks, many linked to Al-Qaeda, can be traced to Somali Islamic operatives. In 1998, the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were simultaneously bombed. In 2002, the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombasa, Kenya was bombed and an Israeli El-Al airliner was simultaneously nearly shot down by terrorists wielding SA-7 Strella surface-to-air missiles. In 2003, an attempted attack on the US embassy in Nairobi was foiled by Kenyan authorities.

Targeted attacks such as these fall under the theory of destructive terrorism, as described by terrorism expert Robert Pape. Destructive terrorists seek to cause real and lasting physical harm while psychologically affecting a viewing public. These attacks did just that – coercing Westerners to leave Africa, inflicting serious harm to US interests, mobilizing support among radicals, and gaining widespread media attention. In each instance listed, terrorists either entered Kenya from Somalia or fled there after the attacks, supporting the belief that there is an Al-Qaeda hub operating from Somalia.

With the end of the Cold War and the erosion of security of Russian nuclear technology, Dempsey cites the greater likelihood that a nuclear weapon could be passed onto a terrorist hub, especially in the chaotic environment of a failed state. If Somali hubs can connect with nodes in and outside of the US, then the threat of nuclear or bio-terrorism is
legitimate. Failed states serve as an acute risk to US national security, as well as the security of neighboring states of Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti.

**Counterterrorism Efforts**

The US and its African partners have taken significant steps to combat terrorism in the Horn of Africa. These have taken the form of military strikes, law enforcement, security assistance programs, and examining the root causes of terrorism in an attempt to win over the hearts and minds of the people. Two specific initiatives stand out. In October 2002, the US launched the Combined Joint Task Force – Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA). Based in Camp Lemonier in Djibouti, it is the only American military base in Africa. Tasked with “detecting, disrupting, and defeating transnational terrorist groups; countering the resurgence of international terrorism, and enhancing the long-term stability of the region,” the 1,800-strong soldier and civilian force trains and shares intelligence with allied counterterrorist forces and troops of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya. It has also refurbished schools, clinics, provided medical services, and carried out poverty alleviations.13

The second initiative is the East Africa Counter-Terrorism Initiative (EACTI), formed in June 2003. EACTI was created to facilitate the Bush administration’s counterterrorist priorities. The bulk of the $100 million in funding has gone to “hard” aspects of counterterrorism such as security programs, military training for border control and coastal security, police training, and aviation security capacity. $10 million was allocated to Kenya’s Anti-Terror Police Unit, and only $14 million went to “soft” methods of combating terrorism like education and building up basic infrastructure.14
This US emphasis on military power in African counterterrorism and effective solutions to combat terrorism will be discussed further on.

**Somalia, the Quintessential Failed State**

Failed states are characterized by a government authority that has collapsed, violence that has become endemic, a cessation of any form of functional governance, the disintegration and criminalization of public security forces, and the erosion of basic infrastructure. Robin Dorff goes further to explain that “the state loses the ability to perform the basic functions of governance, and it loses legitimacy…the inability of political institutions to meet the basic functions of legitimate governance is also accompanied by economic collapse…this economic collapse is almost everywhere present in cases of state failure.” Somalia is viewed today as a rare example of a failed state that has suffered complete and total collapse. In fact, it is the longest running instance of state collapse in post-colonial history. One expert described Somalia as the perfect model of a collapsed state: “a geographical expression only, with borders but with no effective way to exert authority within those borders.” There is no argument as to the effective status of Somalia as a failed state, but what exactly are the implications of state failure in regard to its repercussions on Somalia’s regional neighbors, Africa as a whole, and the entire international community?

**Somaliland – A Case of Progress**

While there is no functioning central authority in Somalia, peace and security do exist in certain areas. Somalia is, in other words, “without government but not without
One clear example is Somaliland, the self-proclaimed autonomous region in the northwest of the country. Without a central government to protect them, the residents of Somaliland seceded in 1991 in order to provide their own security and they have enjoyed impressive success. Most of Somaliland is comparatively as safe as anywhere in the Horn of Africa and economic recovery has taken place there that is nonexistent in the south.

Menkhaus explains that what sets Somaliland apart from the rest of the country is “a very strong commitment by civil society to peace and rule of law,” which serves to deter criminals, warlords, and politicians tempted to exploit clan tensions. The lack of external assistance to Somaliland speaks volumes as well to the ability of Somali society to correct itself without outside help. Somaliland’s stability is the premier example of the “building block approach” to Somali state-building. Embraced at one time by external forces, the approach stressed the development of local governments that can maintain security and rule of law. What has emerged today in Somalia is something like medieval Europe – a “loose constellation of commercial city-states and villages separated by long stretches of pastoral statelessness.” The case of Somaliland, however, serves as a testament to the strength, adaptation, stability, and ingenuity of decentralized local governance and its potential to play an active role in national reconciliation.

The superiority of Somali local governance is not something that occurred overnight. The abandonment of support for the state is widespread in Somalia, where most citizens harbor deep mistrust toward central authority and the state as an institution. This point of view has become the majority as the past twenty years have witnessed only weak and corrupt regimes that lined the pockets of those in control and usurped foreign
aid meant for citizens who are suffering. For others, perpetuating statelessness is of greater benefit to them than the alternative. These people are known as “spoilers.” They have usually arrived at this decision by witnessing their well-being decline every time a national government is partially resurrected. They range from clansmen to businessmen, but all have one thing in common: they actively seek to maintain the status quo of a lack of central authority and an overall anarchic structure.

State-Building Efforts

The US role in Somali state-building and national reconciliation has been faulty and unsuccessful overall. Blurring the threat of terrorism with local struggles, US authorities perceived the rise of the Islamic Courts Union in 2005 as an exploitation of Somalia’s status as a failed state to spread radical Wahabbist ideology and secure a base from which terrorists can operate. While two factions of the ICU are indeed militant and jihadist administrations, large groups of the ICU that sought power in 2005 and 2006 were moderate Islamists like Sheik Sharif Sheik Ahmed, one of the Court’s leaders, who was a vocal proponent of dialogue with the West. In addition, although Somalia is 98% Sunni Muslim, the majority ascribes to a moderate, secularized, and less strict form of Islam. Therefore, the ICU’s rise did not represent a jihadist growth among Somalis; rather its sustained popularity was the result of its ability to restore security and order to vast swaths of Somali territory.

Instead of working with the moderate elements within the ICU, the CIA adopted a different strategy. They paid between $100,000 and $150,000 a month to an alliance of warlords, the Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counter-terrorism (ARPCT), to wage
war to defeat the ICU. The approach badly backfired when the Islamists repelled the attacks and took control of Mogadishu after heavy fighting that claimed over 300 lives.\textsuperscript{25} When the ICU consolidated power and briefly took control in June 2006, their disarmament of militias and policing of city streets made Mogadishu the safest it had been in over fifteen years.\textsuperscript{26} In this way, US intelligence agents erred by reading too much ideological importance into what was essentially a localized power struggle fuelled by the failure of the TFG to maintain stability. Focusing too heavily on ideological counterterrorism obscured the central tenet of counterterrorist strategy itself – providing basic security. The ICU in 2006 had the potential to do this. However, Ethiopia, backed by the US, invaded and ousted the ICU in late 2006 and remains in Somalia, holding up the excuse for a government that is the TFG.

**A New Approach – Alliances and Agreements**

A multi-faceted solution is necessary to combat terrorism and the larger, more complex problem of state failure in the Horn of Africa. In regard to driving out radical factions of the ICU, such as the extremist Shaabab movement, lessons can be drawn from theories on counterinsurgency and the US experience in Iraq over the past two years. The “surge” tactics, carried out under the leadership of General David Petraeus, provide some useful tips that can be applied to co-opt radical factions in Mogadishu. Emphasis needs to be placed on policing and intelligence, two central tenets to counterinsurgency theory. In mirroring the increase of US troops in Iraq, a large African force, composed of many nationalities, must enter Somalia to put a stop to the violence. Increased troop presence would mean decreased violence and stable security for residents. Direct population of
troops has the dual-sided effect of denying territory to insurgents and winning over the local support that develops from a secure populace.

A Counterinsurgency

In accordance with troop population surges, incentives must be provided for insurgents to refrain from violence. Perhaps a program modeled after the “Sons of Iraq” could take effect in Mogadishu in which militias would cease violence and provide security in exchange for legitimacy and inclusion in the government. Another facet of counterinsurgency is the driven will of a community to expel the violence that plagues it. Iraq’s “Anbar Awakening” model, which ousted al-Qaeda in Iraq from the volatile Anbar province, shows that increased troop presence, local knowledge, and cooperation among tribal sheiks can effectively root out extremism and allow for coexistence, even in an ethnically diverse region such as Anbar. Cooperation with locals denies insurgents the crucial sanctuary and support they rely on within the civilian populace. Hopefully, a similar model could be applied to the violent clan warfare that has plagued Somalia. The case of Iraq provides one more lesson in the importance of border security. Just as foreign terrorists flooded into Iraq via Syria, Somalia’s borders must be tightened and patrolled to block foreign terrorists from entering and fomenting chaos. Despite the numerous benefits of counterinsurgent strategy, it should only be seen as a temporary solution to end violence and pave the way for the TFG to provide security to its own people. The success of the Iraqi Security Force (ISF) gives hope to the idea that a legitimate public security force is possible in Somalia.
An Intervention

Somalia’s situation can also be viewed through the complex lens of humanitarian interventions. M.I.T. political science professor Barry Posen’s theories on humanitarian crisis response support stable solutions that can be applied to Somalia. One method discussed is the “enforced truce,” in which outside actors place enough military force into the area where fighting is underway that violence can no longer occur and peace is forced among parties. For a long-term solution, a large military presence is needed. This force must be new and pan-African, not Ethiopian or US-based, both of whom are already viewed as foreign occupiers. A robust African Union force such as this was authorized in January 2007, but has yet to take shape. African nations must step up to the challenge and supply troops if they wish to see a decrease in violence in Somalia and the larger Horn of Africa. Humanitarian interventions, however, serve in reality only as a figurative “time-out.” They operate to save lives; they do not solve the political problems that produced the initial violence. That duty falls to the state, which must be actively utilizing the lull in violence to reconcile warring factions and find a durable political solution. That duty falls to the TFG.

A Mediated State

How can the Somali state reconcile its clan-based politics and warring parties? Crisis Group reports that “It is of the utmost importance to ensure that all key stakeholders – including clan elders, Islamic leaders, representatives of the business community, civil society and women – are engaged in an inclusive political and institutional process on the basis of the Transitional Federal Charter.” This means
reaching out to moderate elements of the ICU and persuading them to reign in their radical factions in exchange for a share in government. This means striking a balance between a legitimate central authority that is recognized, but allows local governance to endure as the nature of Somali security. Menkhaus describes a “mediated state in which the government relies on partnership (or at least coexistence) with a diverse range of local intermediaries and rival sources of authority to provide core functions of public security, justice, and conflict management…”32 There is no zero-sum solution on any of these matters, each require compromise. US and UN approaches have focused on a top-down state-building approach, believing that Somalia can only begin to stabilize once a central authority is in place, despite how weak it is. In actuality, external forces should be supporting bottom-up peace-building approaches of attaining basic stability, security, and infrastructure in localities and cautiously applying local governance stability to the formation of a unified and diverse central authority made up of both Islamist and secular elements.

Conclusion

In sum, US counterterrorism strategy must focus more on “soft tactics” similar to the CJTF-HOA’s actions in Djibouti. Instead of relying only on targeted strikes and large-scale detainment, US counterterrorist forces should be joining with their African counterparts to eradicate poverty, resolve conflict, and build peace. Combined with an increase in soft counterterrorism should be a more specific protocol for the use of hard tactics. Strategists need to avoid the sort of anti-American sentiment that resulted from the US AC-130 airstrikes in January and February of 2007 that were aimed at al-Qaeda
operatives but caused civilian casualties as well. As Posen explains, indiscriminate bombing, or bombing that seems indiscriminate, often alienates the community it seeks to aid. Dempsey outlines an additional strategy of integrating US foreign intelligence, the military, and US law enforcement to seek out, apprehend, arrest, and ultimately try terrorists in international criminal tribunals. This would inspire rule of law and treat them as criminals instead of belligerents. He also suggests recruiting Somalis from the diaspora to serve in community police forces, allowing them to empathize with residents and be trusted in return.

Complementing an improved counterterrorist strategy should be a bold approach to state-building focused on compromise, reconciliation, and incentives for all groups to take part. Alliances and agreements, among both Somali factions and foreign powers, are vital to fostering a stable future. As Ethiopian troops withdraw, a multi-national African Union force should move in to maintain peace, giving the TFG a chance to reach out to moderate elements of the ICU as well as other powerful clans to form a national government that is able to reassert the basic functions of a state. This process will not be quick and it will not be easy. It will involve painful concessions from all sides and there will be many obstacles to overcome. Continued monetary and strategic support from the US and especially the EU is necessary to foster this solution, while AU troops create stability on the ground in Somalia. State building is an exceptionally complicated and difficult process, but the US and the larger international community cannot afford to abandon Somalia once more.
Notes

4 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 81-82.
10 Kagwanja, “Counter-terrorism in the Horn of Africa,” 73.
13 Kagwanja, “Counter-terrorism in the Horn of Africa,” 82.
14 Kagwanja, “Counter-terrorism in the Horn of Africa,” 82.
16 Quoted in Dempsey, “Counterterrorism,” 2.
17 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 74.
19 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 90.
20 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 91.
21 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 93.
22 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 86.
23 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 91.
25 Kagwanja, “Counter-terrorism in the Horn of Africa,” 83.
26 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 89.
32 Menkhaus, “Governance,” 78.
34 Posen, “Military Responses,” 87.
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