Somalia: 'They Created a Desert and Called it Peace(building)'

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Somalia: ‘They Created a Desert and Called it Peace(building)’

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This article documents the humanitarian, political and security dimensions of the current Somali crisis and assesses the external policies that are playing an increasingly central role in the conflict. It advances the thesis that in 2007 and 2008 external Western and UN actors treated Somalia as a post-conflict setting when in fact their own policies helped to inflame armed conflict and insecurity there. As a result there was no peace for peacekeepers to keep, no state to which state-building projects could contribute, and increasingly little humanitarian space in which aid agencies could reach over 3 million Somalis in need of emergency relief. The gap between Somali realities on the ground and the set of assumptions on which aid and diplomatic policies toward Somalia have been constructed is wide and deep.

Introduction

Explanations of Somalia’s extraordinary 20-year crisis – featuring civil war, state collapse, failed peace talks, violent lawlessness and warlordism, internal displacement and refugee flows, chronic food insecurity, piracy, regional proxy wars and Islamic extremism – have tended to fall in one of two camps. One assigns blame primarily on internal factors perpetuating the country’s crisis; the other emphasises the role of external drivers. Both have ample evidence on which to draw. Accurate analysis of the Somali crisis must account for both internal and external conflict drivers and the mutually reinforcing dynamics that have developed between them.

A case can also be made that the relative salience of these conflict drivers has changed over time. In the early years of the Somali disaster, internal factors – warlordism, clannism, poor leadership, economic constraints and others – were decisive in perpetuating the civil war and undermining external peacebuilding efforts. External policies in the 1990s at times made things worse – by failing to provide timely diplomatic mediation when it was most needed in 1991, and intervening clumsily in the UN Operation in Somalia in 1993–94 – but were not a root cause of the crisis. However, in recent years external actors have come to play an increasingly central role in perpetuating or exacerbating the Somali crisis. In some instances, external actors have intentionally set out to cultivate divisions and lawlessness in Somalia, or to use the country to play out proxy wars against regional rivals. In other cases, external interventions have been well intentioned but ill-advised, falling victim to the law of unintended consequences and in the process making things worse.
Things are certainly worse in Somalia. The two-year period of 2007–08 was a calamity of enormous proportions for the country, arguably as bad as the disastrous civil war and famine of 1991–92. A fierce insurgency and counter-insurgency pitting Ethiopian occupying forces against armed resistance led by the radical Islamist group shabaab devastated the country and polarised politics in Somalia still further. Somalia staggered into the year 2009 as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, with 1.3 million internally displaced persons and 3.5 million people in need of emergency aid. Some positive developments in early 2009 offered hope – Ethiopian forces withdrew, and a power-sharing accord between the weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and moderate elements of the opposition led to a new, more broad-based government. But in its first months in power the new TFG showed little capacity to extend its authority, and several radical Islamist insurgency groups, one with links to al-Qaeda, gained control over most of southern Somalia and pushed into parts of the capital Mogadishu.

This is the exact opposite of what the US and its allies sought to promote when they supported the December 2006 Ethiopian military intervention in Somalia to oust the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Mogadishu. Most Somalis are bewildered by external policies that have laid waste to their already desperately poor country while simultaneously promising to support peacebuilding efforts there.

This article documents the humanitarian, political and security dimensions of the current Somali crisis and assesses the policies of one set of external actors – the loose coalition of Western governments and the UN which have sought to support the TFG, moderate Islamism, African peacekeeping and power-sharing in Somalia. It advances the thesis that Western and UN actors treated Somalia in 2007 and 2008 as a post-conflict setting when in fact it remained in a state of open and heavy armed conflict. In some cases, Western and UN polices inadvertently helped to inflame armed conflict and insecurity there. As a result, there was no peace for peacekeepers to keep, no state to which state-building projects could contribute, and increasingly little humanitarian space in which aid agencies could reach over 3 million Somalis in need of emergency relief. The gap between Somali realities on the ground and the set of assumptions on which aid and diplomatic policies toward Somalia have been constructed is wide and deep.

**The Path to Catastrophe**

The current crisis in Somalia is the culmination of a series of developments since 2004, when national reconciliation talks produced an agreement on a Transitional Federal Government, or TFG. The TFG, led by President Abdullahi Yusuf, was intended to be a government of national unity, tasked with administering a five-year political transition. But the TFG was viewed by many Somalis, especially some clans in and around the capital Mogadishu, as a narrow coalition dominated by the clans of the president and his Prime Minister, Mohamed Ghedi (ICG 2004, p. 1). It was also derided by its critics as being a puppet of neighbouring Ethiopia. Yusuf’s deep animosity toward any and all forms of political Islam alarmed the increasingly powerful network of Islamists operating schools, hospitals, businesses and local sharia courts in Mogadishu. By early 2005, serious splits emerged within the TFG between what became known as the ‘Mogadishu Group’ and Yusuf’s supporters. Facing deep opposition in Mogadishu, the TFG was unable to establish itself in the capital, taking up residence instead in two small provincial towns. Weak and dysfunctional, the TFG appeared
destined to become yet another stillborn government in Somalia, which has not had an operational central government since 1990 (Menkhaus 2007).

However, the coalition of clans, militia leaders, civic groups and Islamists which formed the Mogadishu Group were themselves divided, and war erupted between two wings of the group in early 2006. This war was precipitated by a US-backed effort to create an alliance of clan militia leaders to capture a small number of foreign al-Qaeda operatives believed to be enjoying safe haven in Mogadishu as guests of the hardline Somalia Islamists, especially the jihadi militia known as the shabaab. The Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism, or ARPCT, as the US-backed group was called, clashed with local Islamists in a war that originally began over real estate and business disputes between two rival businessmen (Barnes and Hassan 2007, p. 4). Within months the Alliance was decisively defeated, paving the way for the rise of the Islamic Courts Union, or ICU, which for seven months in 2006 came to control and govern all of Mogadishu and most of south-central Somalia.

The ICU was a broad umbrella group of Islamists, and for a brief period was poised to end Somalia’s 16 years of state collapse. The ICU quickly delivered impressive levels of street security and law and order to Mogadishu and south-central Somalia. It reopened the seaport and international airport and began providing basic government services (Barnes and Hassan 2007, p. 4). In the process, the ICU won widespread support from war-weary Somalis, even those who did not embrace the idea of Islamic rule. To its credit, the US government made a good faith effort to support negotiations between the ICU and the TFG, with the aim of creating a power-sharing government. But then things went wrong. A complex power struggle emerged within the ICU, pitting Hawiye clan interests, Islamic moderates, hardline but cautious Islamists, and confrontational jihadists in the shabaab militia (ICG 2007, pp. 5–9). The hardliners began pushing the ICU into increasingly bellicose and radical positions that alarmed neighbouring Ethiopia and the United States. The ICU declared jihad on Ethiopia, hosted two armed insurgencies opposed to the Ethiopian government, made irredentist claims on Ethiopian territory, and enjoyed extensive support from Ethiopia’s enemy, Eritrea, which was eager to use the ICU to wage a proxy war against Ethiopia. In short, the hardliners in the ICU did everything they could to provoke a war with Ethiopia, and in late December 2006 they got their wish (Prendergast 2008). For its part, the United States understandably grew increasingly frustrated with the ICU’s dismissive non-cooperation regarding foreign al-Qaeda operatives in Mogadishu, and as a result became more receptive to, and supportive of, an Ethiopian military solution.

Ethiopia’s US-backed military offensive against the ICU was a rout. The ICU militias took heavy losses in the first engagements, and when they fell back to Mogadishu angry clan and business leaders forced the ICU to disband and return weapons and militiamen to the clans (Barnes and Hassan 2007). While core ICU supporters fled toward the Kenyan border, the Ethiopian military, marched into Mogadishu unopposed. Within days the TFG relocated to the capital to govern over a shocked and sullen population. It was a scenario no one had foreseen, and set the stage for the current catastrophe.

Enmity between Ethiopian highlanders and Somalis is deep, rooted in centuries of conflict. The Ethiopian government, its allies and its enemies all understood that a prolonged Ethiopian military occupation of the Somali capital would be resented
by Somalis and was certain to trigger armed resistance. The proposed solution was rapid deployment of an African Union peacekeeping force to replace the Ethiopians. But African leaders, not unlike their European and North American counterparts, were reluctant to commit troops into such a dangerous environment, and after long delays were only able to muster a force of 2,000. So Ethiopian forces stayed, joined in their efforts by TFG security forces which Ethiopia trained.

Within weeks, a complex insurgency – composed of a regrouped shabaab, ex-ICU sharia court militias, clan militias and other armed groups – began a campaign of armed resistance. Attacks on the TFG and the Ethiopian military occurred each day, involving mortars, roadside bombs, ambushes and even suicide bombings. The Ethiopian and TFG response was extremely heavy-handed, involving attacks on whole neighbourhoods, indiscriminate violence targeting civilians and widespread arrest and detention. TFG security forces were especially predatory toward civilians, engaging in looting, assault and rape. The insurgency and counter-insurgency produced a massive wave of displacement in 2007: 700,000 of Mogadishu’s population of 1.3 million were forced to flee from their homes.

This disastrous level of violence and destruction had other costs as well. The already fragile economy of south-central Somalia collapsed; the TFG was unable to establish even a token civil service or advance the political transition; Ethiopia took heavy losses and, as predicted, became trapped in a quagmire in Mogadishu; and thousands of Somalis became radicalised by their treatment at the hands of the TFG and Ethiopian forces, and, despite deep misgivings about the insurgents’ indiscriminate use of violence, became either active or passive supporters of the increasingly violent shabaab and other armed groups.

By late 2007, open splits occurred in both the opposition and the TFG. These splits had the potential to be negative – leading to uncontrolled splintering of Somali political actors – or positive – providing a new opportunity for the creation of a centrist coalition in Somalia and marginalise hardliners on both sides. In the opposition, exiled ICU leaders established an umbrella group with non-Islamist Somalis, called the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia, or ARS. This alliance prompted the shabaab to publicly break with the ‘apostate’ ARS. In the TFG, the corrupt and deeply divisive Prime Minister Ghedi was finally forced to resign, and a new Prime Minister, Hassan Hussein Nur ‘Adde’, came to lead a promising moderate wing of the TFG. He formed a new cabinet that included many technocrats from the Somali diaspora, and reached out to the opposition, pledging himself to unconditional peace talks. His efforts were viewed with deep hostility by the hardliners in the Yusuf camp.

The international community, led by UN Special Representative for the Secretary-General Ould Abdullah, sought to forge a centrist coalition of TFG and opposition figures. In June 2008, a UN-brokered peace accord was reached in Djibouti between moderate elements in the TFG and moderate leaders in the ARS, the latter led by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and Sharif Hassan (known locally as the ‘two Sharifs’). The Djibouti Agreement was finally signed on 18 August and in November a follow-up agreement was reached. The Djibouti agreement and the follow-up accord called for a cessation of hostilities, a joint security force, deployment of a UN peacekeeping force, withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, a two-year extension of the TFG mandate, and an additional 275 Parliamentary seats created for the opposition, so that the parliament would constitute a unity government.
Supporters of the agreement saw it as a major breakthrough and called for strong international support for implementation of the agreement. In mid-2008 their initial hope was that any agreement that facilitated the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces would open the door for an end to the insurgency. They pointed to the fact that most of the war-weary Somali public wanted to see the agreement implemented as well. By late 2008 the logic in support of the accord had changed. With Ethiopia threatening to pull out unilaterally by the end of the year, and with shabaab consolidating control over most of southern Somalia, proponents of the accord argued that the moderate coalition formed by the agreement was the only hope to stave off a take-over of the capital by shabaab. Critics of the deal argued that the moderates on both sides exercised little control over the armed groups engaged in fighting, that UN peacekeepers would take too long to effectively deploy and would only energise the shabaab, and that the accord ran the risk of further fragmenting both the ARS and the TFG in ways that could marginalise the very moderates the international community was trying to support.

By early 2009, Somalia appeared to have weathered the worst of its crisis. Ethiopian forces withdrew as promised, while the Djibouti agreement produced a new, more broad-based government featuring moderate Islamist leadership of Sheikh Sharif, leader of the old ICU. Shabaab was in short order deprived of its main nemeses, and faced growing resistance from clan militias that were allied with the new TFG and which had no interest in seeing a radical jihadist group with al-Qaeda links take power. Shabaab was unable to exploit the so-called strategic vacuum created by the Ethiopian withdrawal. But, as argued below, hopes that 2009 would witness the expansion of the TFG’s authority and the marginalisation of radical insurgents in Somalia did not materialise in the first half of the year.

**Humanitarian Catastrophe**

The humanitarian nightmare in Somalia is the result of a lethal cocktail of factors. The large-scale displacement caused by the fighting in Mogadishu is the most important driver. The displaced have fled mainly into the interior of the country, where they lack access to food, clean water, basic health care, livelihoods and support networks. Internally displaced persons, or IDPs, are among the most vulnerable populations in any humanitarian emergency. With 700,000 people out of a population of perhaps 6 million in south-central Somalia forced to flee their homes, the enormity of the emergency is obvious.6

Second, food prices have skyrocketed, eroding the ability of both IDPs and other households to feed themselves. Food prices have gone up due to a global spike in the cost of grains and fuel; chronic insecurity and crime, which has badly disrupted the flow of commercial food into the country; and an epidemic of counterfeiting of the Somali shilling by politicians and businesspeople, which has created hyperinflation and has robbed poorer Somalis of purchasing power. Mother Nature is not cooperating either: a severe drought is gripping much of central Somalia, increasing displacement, killing off much of the livestock, and reducing harvests in farming areas.

Third, humanitarian agencies in Somalia are facing daunting obstacles to delivery of food aid. There is now very little ‘humanitarian space’ in which aid can safely be delivered to populations in need.7 Until recently, the TFG and its uncontrolled security
forces were mainly responsible for most obstacles to delivery of food aid. TFG hardliners viewed the movement of food aid to IDPs as support to an enemy population – terrorists and terrorist sympathisers in their view – and sought to impede the flow of aid convoys through a combination of bureaucratic and security impediments. They also harassed and detained staff of local and international non-governmental organisations, or NGOs and UN agencies, accusing them of supporting the insurgency. Uncontrolled and predatory TFG security forces, together with opportunistic criminal gangs, erected over 400 militia roadblocks (each of which demanded as much as US$500 per truck to pass) and kidnapped local aid workers for ransom.

However, since May 2008 an additional threat to humanitarian actors are jihadist cells in Mogadishu linked to the shabaab. They are engaged in a campaign of threats and alleged assassinations against any and all Somalis working for Western aid agencies or collaborating the UN and Western NGOs. Not all shabaab members embrace this policy – indeed, some shabaab cells provide protection for aid convoys while nearby shabaab groups actively target aid workers – but jihadist cells in southern Somalia are now increasingly fragmented.

To summarise, Somali aid workers and other civic leaders have faced a terrifying combination of threats from hardline elements in the TFG, criminal gangs and shabaab cells. This has infused political violence with a high level of unpredictability and randomness in Mogadishu that has eroded the ability of astute Somali aid workers, businesspeople and civic figures to make calculated risks in their movements and work. When threats and attacks occur, aid workers are never sure whether they were targeted by the TFG or the shabaab. 'We used to know where the threat was and how to deal with it', said one. ‘Now we have no idea who is shooting us’. Attacks initially believed to be the handiwork of a shabaab cell are latterly suspected of being ordered by one of the TFG hardliners; in the swirl of rumors and accusations, uncertainty reigns.

However, the one thing that is certain are the casualty rates among aid workers, which currently earn Somalia a ranking as the most dangerous place in the world for humanitarian workers. In the period from 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008, 20 aid workers were killed in Somalia – nearly a third of the 65 humanitarian casualties worldwide during that period, and two more humanitarian deaths than occurred in Afghanistan, which is widely considered the most dangerous place for aid workers. 8

These attacks have put thousands of Somali professionals, aid workers, moderate Islamic clerics, businesspeople and civil society leaders at immediate risk, and have prompted a flight of aid workers and civil society figures to the relative safety of Nairobi or Hargeisa, the capital of the self-declared independent republic of Somaliland. The July 2008 assassination of the top national officer for the UN Development Programme in Somalia was especially jarring, prompting relocation of most UN local staff and suspension of UNDP activities. But the most devastating attack was the 29 October 2008 synchronised suicide bombing attacks by shabaab which struck five targets in Somaliland and Puntland, which left over 20 Somalis dead, including several UN staff members who were killed when one car bomb completely destroyed the UNDP compound in Hargeisa (CNN 2008). Both local and international aid agencies are now either not able to conduct operations at all or are operating at extremely limited capacity. This severe restriction on humanitarian access is occurring at precisely the point when local coping mechanisms are breaking down and that 3.2 million Somalis are at immediate risk. The country is on the cusp of a humanitarian disaster at a time when aid agencies are severely stretched in their ability to
respond and admit that Somalia is an ‘accountability free-zone’ in terms of their ability to monitor shipments of food aid.⁹

A critical dimension of this reduction of humanitarian space is the role that Western foreign policies have inadvertently played in creating it. Shabaab threats aimed at aid workers are in direct response to the US designation of shabaab as a terrorist organisation in March 2008, and the May 2008 US missile strike on a safe house in central Somalia that killed the shabaab’s leader, Aden Hashi Ayro. Prior to those policies, the shabaab was directing its attacks against the TFG and the Ethiopian military. After the missile attack on Ayro, the shabaab declared its intent to widen the war to any and all Western targets inside and outside the country, including Somalis working in any way with the West. Threats and violence by hardliners in the TFG against civil society figures and aid workers also can be traced back to Western policies, inasmuch as the TFG police force, which is implicated in attacks on and abuse of Somali civilians, have been provided training and even salaries by Western donors.

The new TFG government has promised to work to improve security and access for aid agencies but currently lacks the ability to deliver on that promise. Aid agencies which have pragmatically worked with shabaab groups to deliver food aid into areas controlled by that group have come under fire from UN and donor state diplomats upset that shabaab may be using its control over the distribution of food relief to shore up its power base, and to profit from possible diversion of food aid. For their part, humanitarian aid organisations have resented efforts to politicise their work by diplomats instructing them on who they may and may not work through on the ground.

Political Paralysis

The assassination campaign by TFG hardliners and fragments of the shabaab movement is the latest attack on Somalia’s once vibrant civil society and has the potential to develop into a violent purge of all professionals and civic figures. Somali civic figures are in shock at this latest threat, and are either fleeing the capital or keeping a very low profile. This is an enormous setback for hopes to consolidate peace in the country, as civil society leaders are essential supporters of the centrist coalition of the new TFG. The group of people most needed to support peace and co-existence are being silenced or driven out, clearing the playing field for extremists.

The Djibouti agreement and the new TFG coalition produced a sense of cautious optimism among Somalis. However, any initiative openly designed to marginalise hardliners and build a centrist coalition faces immediate dangers, and Sheikh Sharif’s TFG is no exception. Open rejection of the Djibouti agreement by the shabaab leadership and hardline elements within the ARS itself highlighted the fact that the former ARS leadership has no control over a principal source of the insurgency.¹⁰

Internal fragmentation of the shabaab and other Islamist insurgencies makes the challenge of implementation even greater, since any understanding reached with shabaab leaders may or may not influence the behaviour of individual cells. Indeed, growing evidence suggests that at least some militias now calling themselves shabaab are just sub-clan militias ‘rehattting’ themselves for reasons of political expediency; some have no discernible Islamist ideological agenda, and do not answer to shabaab leadership. ‘The militia who call themselves shabaab are just the same Haber Gedir gunmen
who have occupied us for years’, observed a Somali resident from the Jubba Valley. ‘They just put a turban on their heads and gave themselves the new name, but their treatment of us is the same’.

While implementation of the Djibouti agreement has been the current preoccupation of the diplomatic corps, other political problems loom large. The first is the TFG’s virtual collapse as a government. The TFG has never been functional, despite the best efforts of the international community to pretend otherwise. After almost four years of existence, the TFG still has almost no capacity to govern and almost no functional civil service. Cabinet ministers have no ministries to oversee, and no budget. Armed groups fighting against the *shabaab* are doing so as allies of the TFG in negotiated arrangements with the government, not under its command and control. No progress has been made on key transitional tasks. The TFG has lost control over most of the countryside and the capital.

Military advances by *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya*, a rejectionist militia headed up by ex-ICU leader Hassan Dahir Aweys, have pushed the TFG into a few neighbourhoods of the capital. This has not been so much a reflection of the strength of *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* as it has been a function of the utter lack of capacity of the TFG to sustain a fighting force. The possibility that the TFG could be defeated entirely is real, and a recipe for trouble. *Shabaab*’s links to al-Qaeda are likely to prompt Ethiopia to move its military back into Somalia. *Shabaab* has every reason to draw Ethiopia back into Somalia, as that would allow it to once again cast its role as that of a Somali resistance movement to Ethiopian imperialism, rather than being viewed by Somalis as a tool of al-Qaeda and Eritrea, the latter of which is using Somali Islamist groups in a proxy war against Ethiopia.

Even in the event of an insurgent victory over the TFG, fighting is unlikely to end. Instead, most Somali observers expect *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* to fight one another. Whatever the outcome, two significant interpretations of the current battle are emerging from Somali political discussions. The first is the observation that the current battle is a war of Islamists. All three of the main protagonists in the battles in 2009 – the TFG, *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* – identify themselves as Islamists. This is a remarkable shift in the Somali political landscape, underscoring the ascendance of political Islam in Somalia and yet exposing the fact that Islamism has failed to serve as the unifying force so many Somalis have hoped that it would. Second, the battles of 2009 are increasingly being described by Somalis in the country as a war within the Somali diaspora. Many of the leaders of the TFG and insurgents are diaspora members, reflecting the diasporisation of the Somali political and economic elite over the past decade. ‘Unhyphenated Somalis’ stuck in the country with no foreign passports are increasingly angry that they serve as the principal victims of a war over which their hyphenated cousins from the diaspora maintain control.

**Counter-Terrorism Blowback**

Far from rendering Somalia a less dangerous terrorist threat, the effect of the 2007–08 Ethiopian occupation was to make Somalia a much more dangerous place for the US, the West and Ethiopia itself. Somalis were radicalised by the extraordinary level of violence, displacement and humanitarian need. They blame the Ethiopian occupation and the uncontrolled TFG security forces for the catastrophe. But the blame does not
stop there. Most Somalis are convinced that the Ethiopian occupation was authorised and directed by the United States. Although this is a misinterpretation of the complex and often turbulent relationship between Addis Ababa and Washington – two allies with distinct agendas and preferences in the Horn of Africa – it has been an article of faith in the Somali community. The Somalis are not entirely wrong. In 2007 and 2008, the US did provide intelligence to the Ethiopians; was a major source of development and military assistance to Ethiopia; shielded Ethiopia from criticism of its occupation in the UN Security Council; collaborated with the Ethiopians and the TFG in multiple cases of rendition of Somalis suspected of terrorist involvement; and engaged in gunship and missile attacks on suspected terrorist targets inside Somalia since the Ethiopian occupation. These and other policies gave Somalis the clear impression that the United States had orchestrated the Ethiopian occupation and is therefore responsible for its impact.

Moreover, the West has also been held responsible for the abuses committed by the TFG security forces under Abdullahi Yusuf’s presidency until late 2008. This too, is a partial misreading; Western donors and aid agencies had little or no control over the actions of these armed groups and were frequently furious with them over their mistreatment of civilians and disruption of relief aid. But the fact remains that the TFG police were in 2007 trained by, and received salaries from, the UN Development Program, through which Western donor states channelled their ‘rule of law’ assistance to the TFG. For Somalis whose businesses were looted and whose family members were raped or killed by uncontrolled TFG security forces, the West is partly culpable for their suffering.

As a result, anti-Americanism and anti-Western sentiment in Somalia has been very high, posing the risk that more Somalis could become either passive or active supporters of the shabaab. Events since early 2009 have partially reversed this animosity toward the West and US, thanks to the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, Western support for the new TFG, and Somali hopes for a policy shift in the Obama administration. Even so, Western and UN policies in Somalia face high levels of suspicious and mistrust among many Somalis.

**Conclusion**

For years, observers of the Horn of Africa opined that the Somalia crisis could not get any worse. Yet it has, and dramatically so. The country today faces a level of humanitarian, social, security and political disaster on a scale that would have shocked policy makers of 2006 had they had a glimpse into the future. The evidence speaks for itself. Policies pursued by Ethiopia, the United States and Western donors in the past three years have produced outcomes that advance no one’s interests, save perhaps a growing number of number of extreme jihadist cells in the country.

Throughout the crisis of 2007 and 2008, the international community’s insistence on treating Somalia as a ‘post-conflict’ setting, with aid programmes for rule of law, security sector reform and key transitional tasks, appeared increasingly out of touch with grim realities on the ground, and eventually reached the point of willful blindness. Political pressures from key donor states on aid agencies to downplay the humanitarian crisis, stay silent on TFG human rights abuses, and maintain aid programmes in spite of gross levels of abuse and insecurity to help maintain the legitimacy of the TFG, were critical in driving this dysfunctional policy approach.
Somalia has long faced severe internal challenges to peacebuilding and state-building. In recent years it has had to shoulder the additional burden of external policies which have actually helped to make things worse, not better. Finding innovative and constructive policies to confront Somalia’s intractable crises will not be easy, but it will be impossible if not based on more accurate and clear-eyed assessment of the situation on the ground.

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Acknowledgements


Endnotes

1. A more detailed account of recent events in Somalia since 2004 can be found in Menkhaus (2007).

2. Due to space limitations, the complex details of clan politics in shaping support for and opposition to the TFG are not provided here. For our purposes it is enough to note that clannism is one of a number of important elements contributing to the political divisions in Somalia today. For more details, see ICG (2004, 2007), Barnes and Hassan (2007) and Menkhaus (2007).

3. It was never clear that any of the main players in the Somali saga—hardliners in the TFG (including the President and Prime Minister), Ethiopia and hardliners in the ICU—would have been willing to see these power-sharing negotiations succeed, but at the time it was the best hope to bring peace to Somalia.

4. The precise position of the US Government vis-à-vis the Ethiopian military offensive and occupation of southern Somalia remains the subject of debate, with conflicting accounts even within the US Government. These debates centre around whether and to what extent the US acquiesced, gave tacit support for, gave a ‘green light’ to, or actively requested Ethiopian military action against the ICU. What is indisputable is that once the Ethiopian offensive was immanent, the US Government actively provided it with support.

5. AMISOM forces levels eventually reached 3,000 by late 2008.

6. The total population of Somalia is unknown and the subject of debate. The most common estimate is 8 to 9 million for the entire country, including the population of secessionist Somaliland in the northwest.

7. As of late 2008, there has been a sharp debate between various UN and NGO humanitarian aid agencies, donors and diplomats over whether adequate humanitarian space exists to permit effective food relief operations in the country. Some argue that the extraordinary number of assassinations of local and international aid workers has resulted in an almost complete evacuation of aid workers across the country, leaving aid agencies with no means of monitoring food shipment distribution. Others argue that despite the difficulties posed by the security crisis, some aid agencies have successfully relied on local partners to move food aid to the 3 million Somalis in need. For recent discussions, see UN OCHA (2008) and ‘Somalia nearing a ‘total famine’.

8. Ten additional aid workers were killed in Somalia between July and October 2008, raising the total to 30 deaths for the year. The UN reports that between January and the end of October 2008, there were 152 security incidents involving humanitarian aid workers. See UN OCHA (2008, p. 6).

10. The ARS is now divided between the moderate wing, led by the two Sharifs and known as ‘ARS-Djibouti’, versus the ARS-Asmara wing headed by Hassan Dahir Aweys. Aweys rejects the Djibouti accord.

11. Correspondence with the author, July 2008.

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