Since the attacks of 9/11 Somalia has become the subject of renewed attention from the United States and Europe. As the archetype of a failed state, the threat it poses has been equated to that which the US faced in Afghanistan and is seen as a fertile ground for radical Islamic groups, in particular al-Qaeda. However Islam in Somalia has a distinct nature. An examination of its history leads to an understanding of the complex relationship between religion and Somali clan-based society. A closer investigation of two of the most important Islamist groups, al-Itihaad and the Council of Islamic Courts, will help to comprehend this relationship within the context of contemporary Somalia. Finally, this article analyses the role of Islam in Somalia's new economy by focusing on the example of the remittance and telecommunication company al-Barakaat that was linked to al-Qaeda by the US after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

THE DISTINCT NATURE OF ISLAM IN SOMALIA

The history of Islam at the Horn of Africa stretches back 1400 years. The faith reached the Horn of Africa from the Arabian Peninsula through trade and migration, mainly from Yemen and Oman.\(^1\) By 1400AD, a large-scale conversion to Islam was taking place in Somalia, first spread by the Dir clan family, but followed by the rest of the nation.\(^2\) In Somalia today, almost 100% of the population are Sunni Muslim, generally adhering to a Shafi'i version of the religion. As L.M. Lewis has pointed out, this was closely linked to the genealogical myths of Somali clan identity and is characterized by the veneration of saints as well as ancestors of various Somali clans. Apolitical Sufism has traditionally dominated this faith.\(^3\)
The distinct nature of political Islam in Somalia can be understood in respect to the Somali clan system, which is segmented along patrilinear decent and different groups, starting from the most stable and smallest “dia-paying group”, followed by the “primary lineage”, “clan” and the “clan-familiy”. Beginning from an extended family, the community enlarges with every past generation, up to the clans and the six huge clan families. “Which unit constitutes the point of reference depends on the situation. The more distant the relationship between quarrelling people or groups, the bigger the unit will be which serves as the community of solidarity.” Accordingly a foreign threat unites Somalis clans.

Islam can be seen as part of the ethic identity of Somalis, even among secular Somalis. It is no wonder therefore, that Islamist politics in Somalia have been the strongest, when they have been in opposition to a foreign, non-Muslim threat. It is a tool that can be used for short-term mass mobilization, especially when mixed with xenophobia. That is the reason why radical Islam is more potent when Somalis find themselves as a minority threatened by secular or Christian regimes, as it is the case in the Ethiopian Ogaden region, in North Kenya or among the Diaspora in Europe and Northern America.

Although one can find some unsuccessful Sufi anti-colonial resistance at the beginning of the 20th century, contemporary political Islam started as an underground movement in the mid 1970s. Various groups were formed up until the end of the 1980s, but there is little information about their real influence on national politics, which is in general perceived as rather weak. When the military took power in Somalia in 1969, General Mahamed Siyaad Barre became President and officially adopted “scientific socialism” in 1970. There was no direct interference in religious practices by the military regime, but incompatibilities between the regime’s politics and religious traditions loomed with the adoption of the Latin alphabet by the regime and the weakening of the traditional gender division in Somali society by the socialist political mobilization. The turning point in the relationship between the regime and religious circles in Somalia was the adoption of a new Family Code in 1975. Ten ulama who openly opposed this new law were executed by the military regime and the government officially denounced the religious people who, in their view, opposed progress in Somali society.

Even so, Roland Marchal argues that the main reason for a “new Is-
Islamic consciousness” did not lie in local politics, but in the change of Somalia’s international engagement. It was in 1974 that Somalia became member of the Arab League, mainly to obtain access to international aid and diplomatic support in their effort to claim Ethiopia’s Ogaden region back. Thus an increased number of Somali students were able to receive their education in foreign religious institutions, namely in al Azhar and in Saudi Arabia. The defeat of the Somali army in the Ogaden War against Ethiopia (1977-8), did not change this trend. If anything, Islamism was strengthened as the Iranian revolution in 1979 fostered the development of political Islam in the region and hence in Somalia as well. Furthermore, in the 1980s, the United Arab Emirates became also an important trading partner, third in line after Saudi Arabia and Italy.

The first Islamic groups that were formed are the Wahdat Shabab al Islami (the Islamic Youth Unity, in Somali known as Waxda) and the Jama’at Ablal Islami (al-Ahli). Both were inspired by the example of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and wanted to apply Islamic principles in an independent, modernizing Somali state. With the above-described events of 1975, many religious leaders and their followers went into exile in the Gulf states, where they joined the Somali Diaspora that emigrated for economic reasons. In these years of exile some were influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood’s ideas of political action, others also by more conservative Salafi ideas, as well as its military branches associated with the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. In Somalia itself, Islamist groups and ideologies evolved in a rather unorganized way and kept a low profile, as their organizations were not strong enough to challenge the oppressive regime. The government itself tried to infiltrate these groups, but was already weakened by an increasingly strong internal opposition movement. It could, therefore, not afford a confrontation with these Islamist groups. In contrast to its goals, the government, by quite successfully banning all books with the exception of the Qur’an, helped to give this religious book an unprecedented status in Somali society.

While one can find different doctrinal approaches between the various Islamist groups in Somalia, that could be described as traditionalists versus reformists versus traditional Salafi groups, it seems that the similarities outbalance the differences. As Roland Marchal has observed, most Islamist groups share the same intellectual reference point of Mohamed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb:
Therefore there are no clear-cut doctrinal or ideological boundaries between them and sympathizers may shift from one group to another... Religious education is not so impressive in Somalia for lay people, as compared for instance to Sudan. What helps to explain the number of these groups are the many differences they have on mundane issues, like ablution, age of marriage and so on. Rituals more than ideology have been the bone of contention.”

Mutatis mutandis, the dominant clan affiliation of the group’s members and leadership are even more important, as well as in some cases, the agendas of their offshore partners, therefore resembling the dynamics in secular political movements. Furthermore, it is crucial to point out that Somalis have never been especially strict in their application of Islamic law. In reality, clan customary law (xeer) as well as civil law have replaced Sharia law in the past, which was limited to manage the rules in the family. It was also common for women to go out in public without the veil, and even fasting throughout Ramadam was not very common. Ken Menkhaus sees one reason in the Somali pastoral life that “imbues a strong preference for pragmatism over ideology, not so much as a matter of choice, but as a matter of survival.” Thus strict Islamic codes are often seen as an imposition of Gulf States customs, which most Somalis perceive as “un-Somali” and can rapidly lead to resentment, because Somalis are deeply proud of their own culture.

THE RISE AND FALL OF AL-ITIHAAD

The various opposition groups did not plan the first popular uprising against the dictatorship in Mogadishu in late December 1990. It can be described as a popular uprising against the regime and the clans that were affiliated with it. The situation soon worsened. Not only the state collapsed, but also traditional bonds among the urban population. Violence was ubiquitous, with armed youth taking over the streets of Mogadishu. Even the various clan segments were not able to provide security for their members. Islamist groups were not engaged nor visible in the hardest period of the fighting. Until late 1992 at least seven different Islamic organizations were established. As pointed out before, it is hard to distinguish these along clear ideological boundaries. The most visible and radical group was al-Itihaad al-Islamii, which is based on the Wababist sect and an offspring
of the Muslim Brotherhood (and was identified by the US as a high ranking terrorist group after the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States). It distinguishes itself from the other organizations because of its organizational discipline and its strategy of taking power by violence. Little is known about its internal structure, but it got support and training from Sudan and invited Afghans to help build training centers for its members. Although it was well connected - some of its cadres came from the former national army - *al-Itihaad* “was never accepted among the factions because this would have allowed it to monopolize the Islamic reference.”

*Al-Itihaad* made several attempts to take direct control over territory. They failed to hold the port of Bosaso in the northeast of Somalia (Puntland region) where they were defeated by the Somalia Salvation Democratic Front. As Marchal points out, the economic elite that is mostly from small sub-clans from Bosaso chose to support al-Itihaad to show their distrust in the regional major clans. Al-Itihaad was consequently thrown into clan politics. When they succeeded in gaining temporary control over the port of Kismayo (south of Mogadishu) they gained high marks for their governance but could nonetheless not gain ground among the population and were defeated by General Aydiid.

A special and insightful case though is the administration of the commercial important town of Luud in the Gedo region (in the southwest at the Kenyan border) from 1991 to 1996/7. The city was administered by an “Islamic Association” and a Sharia court according to Islamic law and not *xeer*. Consequently Islamic laws were enforced, including the prohibition of the mild narcotic *guut*, the enforcement of the veil for all women and punishments according to the Sharia. Al-Itihaad based its local governance on the local clan of the Marehan. This success story in Luud attracted increasingly al-Itihaad members from other clans and showed at first sight the organizations capability to overcome clan identities. However, more secular Marehan in the region now claimed that al-Itihaad is actually a foreign front that wants to take over the Gedo region. In consequence al-Itihaad strongly stated, that they would be part of the Marehan, although at the same time they claimed to overcome clan boundaries. Because Luud town and the region are inhabited by other clans as well, the more al-Itihaad claimed to be Marehan, the more they alienated all the other non-Marehan clans.

In other words, al-Itihaad was put on a level with the Marehan clan and therefore faced the same clan politics as every other “secular” clan does.
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Marchal concludes that’s “as soon as an organization becomes powerful, it is thereafter referred to as a clan organization and thereby ‘belongs’ to the clan of its leader… one cannot escape those family relationships and the obligations they entail.”

Nevertheless the Islamic governance of Luud was able to considerably improve the security in contrast to the turbulent years of 1991/92 and one would therefore expect great output legitimacy among the population. But for all that the population deeply rejected the Sharia code and its punishments that were perceived as cruel and un-Somali and therefore al-Itihaad had no strong backing among the local population.

As it became increasingly clear to the outside world, that al-Itihaad in Luud was successful connecting to other non-Somali Islamist groups and was proceeding its goal to reclaim the Somali Ogaden region in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian government intervened and successfully attacked Luud in 1996 to drive al-Itihaad out of the region.

The most militant wing of al-Itihaad was admittedly operating in the Ogaden region, where, on its agenda was not only, the reunification with Somalia, as other liberation organizations in the Ogaden region sought, but also the creation of a radical Islamic political order. Here al-Itihaad was militarily very active, recruiting its members from the local Darood clan (as all the other resistance movements), and actively fighting against Ethiopian authorities by attacks in Addis Ababa and in Dire Dawa in 1995, as well as an assassination attempt at the Ethiopian Minister of Transport who was from Somali decent. The Ethiopian response was overwhelming. As they did not destroy the al-Itihaad’s leadership when they intervened in Luud, they now finished the job on their own territory in the Ogaden region. After this crackdown, the organization never recovered completely.

Nevertheless it was no big wonder, that not even two weeks after the 9/11 attacks on US soil, the US focused on al-Itihaad in Somalia among many other “terrorist groups” in the world. Though it is not clear if there was a direct link between Al Qa’ida and al-Itihaad, middle level al Qa’ida operatives were active in Nairobi and Mogadishu while plotting the US Embassy Attacks in Dar el Salaam and Nairobi and it is likely that they had connections to al-Itihaad. In truth however, no one really knows.

In the literature, there is dissent on how to interpret al-Itihaad’s role. While the main international actors at the Horn of Africa, the United
States, the United Kingdom, the European Commission and the United Nations describe the organization as an active terrorist organization (and Somalia as a safe haven for terrorist groups), experts from academia, NGO’s as well as intelligence officials, claim that al-Itihaad never was a terrorist organization itself, and is defunct since the crackdown of 1996. An example is the United Nations Panel of Experts report in March 2005, that describes al-Itihaad as actively plotting chaos in Somalia and running terrorist training camps in the country. Yet according to Marchal, al-Itihaad “had never spelled out an international terrorist agenda, except solidarity with other radical Islamic groupings.” He further notes that, the organization’s agenda was focused mainly on Ogaden, although it was in the interest of Ethiopia to describe it as an Islamist terrorist organization and hence get US support for its policy in the Ogaden region. Usama bin Laden’s claim that his supporters were involved in the 3 October 1993 battle in Mogadishu (better known as “Back Hawk down”) could be read along this line. The claim that al-Itihaad is defunct or transformed “from an organization into an idea”, is backed by the International Crisis Group as well as the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The claim that al-Itihaad is defunct or transformed “from an organization into an idea” is backed by the International Crisis Group as well as the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

THE ISLAMIC COURTS EXPERIMENT

The picture of Islamist politics in Somalia becomes further complicated, if one focuses on the establishment of the Sharia court system, that some observers perceived as a deliberate strategy by Islamist groups to take power in Somalia. This is a simplistic view and does not take into consideration the history of the establishment of the courts and its complex relationship with al-Ittihaad.

Since the dissolution of the Somali state most former public services have been necessarily privatized. The relevance of private enterprises therefore skyrocketed in a totally unstable environment, where not even the factional order (i.e. the own sub-clan) could guarantee security for it’s own members. The establishment of the first Sharia courts in 1994, was the most visible evidence of the stealthy influence of Islamist groups in Southern Somalia.
But the Crisis Group points out that the Islamic courts themselves are less a product of political Islam than of clan and Somali’s traditional Islamic faith: “Authority is invested in the courts by the decision of the lineage elders who establish the institution and therefore derives primarily from Somali customary law (xeer).” The mandate of the Sharia courts are derived from agreements that are reached within or between specific (sub-)clans. In absence of any other functioning legal system, Somalis resorted to these Sharia courts, although their link to the Somali factional order meant that their jurisdiction was very local, and limited to its own sub-clan. Because the courts derive their authority from clan elders, the court is able to take action against individuals from the (sub-)clan over which it has authority. Until the court is able to develop effective political, military and financial authority however, the court is very restricted in its actions, if they go against the interest of the clan. Moreover, the clan can always recall its militia from the court and thereby restrict the latter’s effective authority.

With popular support the Islamic courts started to recruit militias and judges. Their official leaders where religious leaders none of whom was known as fundamentalist. According to Le Sage, one can find a variety of motives for the establishment of the courts: first, it was in the interest of local faction leaders that at a certain point could not guarantee security, to maintain public support because of the secure environment the courts established. As a result, internal conflict as well as factional conflict with neighboring clans declined. Secondly, the courts provided a secure environment for local and regional trade, and therefore served the interest of local businessmen, who otherwise, would have had to invest in their own militia. Thirdly, they also served as a platform for a small number of radical Islamists to establish a theocratic state through a radical implementation of the Sharia. The courts played three major roles: forming a militia to detain criminals, passing legal decisions in civil and criminal cases and finally incarcerating convicted criminals.

Funding of the courts was a major problem. At the outset, contributions were given on a voluntary basis, mainly by businessmen, who saved money by paying the relatively cheap Islamic courts and in return got effective protection by a secure environment. It was also in the main market in Mogadishu and on the most important roads for trade, where courts where established. Through funding the courts, donors gain influence on them. Marchal gives a vivid example by citing the case of Merka in
June 2000. The Islamic Courts became too militant in the eyes of the businessmen, hence they withheld their contributions for one week. In reaction, the courts immediately changed their local representative.34

The two major courts were the north Mogadishu and the south Mogadishu courts.35 In October 2000 these two courts came together and formed a Joint Islamic Council, led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, a prominent al-Itihaad figure, as Secretary General and Sheikh Ali Dhere as Chairman. Their single command structure became the single largest military force in Somalia. This led many observers to fear that the real intention of this new Joint Islamic Council was to impose Islamic rule on the whole country. The new organization was able to extend its influence on the Lower Shabbele region, where it established a Sharia court in the town of Merka. Contrary to expectations they did not impose radical Islamic rule, but rather removed militia roadblocks and established a central taxation system. Because the court in Merka was paid by the businessmen in Mogadishu, Le Sage concludes, this was a corporate endeavor rather than a religious or political one. It seems that the businessmen had an interest in pacifying the region to diversify their trade between Mogadishu and Merka.36

It is not possible to test the real intentions of the Joint Islamic Council, because soon after their emergence, the Transitional National Governance (TNG) was created in Arta with the funding of the same businessmen that funded the courts. Although the TNG received support from the Sharia courts and al-Itihaad individuals, the TNG was dominantly secular. Its relationship with the Sharia courts was soon tested, when the courts demanded the Ministry for Justice portfolio in the new government. This was declined and the Sharia militia was integrated into the police force and temporarily separated from the Sharia courts. The judges of the courts were now working for the Somali Justice Ministry.37 As a result, only a few small and uncoordinated courts did not merge into the TNG.38

Yet the TNG was not able to establish a functional administration. When its mandate expired in 2003, they were already irrelevant and South Somalia was again an insecure place. Therefore it is not surprising that the Islamic courts experienced a revival. This started with the foundation of a new umbrella organization for the Mogadishu Sharia courts, the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) of Somalia. As violence in South Somalia loomed again, the courts promise of law and order appealed to the Somali population regardless of their religious views. It was
difficult to label this new organization as either extremist or moderate, because of their diverse membership. “In reality, the courts are an unwieldy coalition of convenience, united by a convergence of interests.”39 Although the courts were generally well received by the population, not all Islamic movements supported them. In particular they faced rejection from the reformist group al Islah, which criticized the poor education and training of the courts sheikhs. But also the general public in Mogadishu did not fully support the new courts organization. Especially those who were members of the TNG administration and co-operated with the US anti-terrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa, were opposed to the courts resurrection and perceived it as platform for Islamic extremists to take power in Somalia.40

The CIC itself got into increased strain until the end of 2004, as the court militia was involved in several clashes with other factions and was perceived as merely one more actor in the chaotic and violent situation at the time.

The formation of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in October 2004 with the appointment of Interim President Abdullah Yusuf was – from the radical Islamist perspective – a great help to overcome its difficulties. Interim President Yusuf was well known for his anti-Islamist policy from when he was governor of Puntland.41 Already in Puntland, he was a regional ally of Christian dominated Ethiopia, and now planned as interim president, to bring troops from Somalia’s neighbors into the country, even from Ethiopia – an anathema not only for the hardliners in the courts leadership, but for a majority of Somalis in the south of the country. Faced with this situation, the courts joined a tactical alliance with Yusuf’s political opponents, and other Islamic leaders as well as Somali nationalists.42 Although this alliance was quickly labeled as a group of extremists by most of the international community and media, the position of the courts reflected public sentiment very well. Subsequently, in December 2004, mass protests with people from various segments of society, took place against Yusuf in Mogadishu. This sudden solidarity among diverse Somali groups can again be understood in the context of the distinct Somali clan system. Faced with a common threat, solidarity is predominant over internal divisions.

One faction of the CIC gradually began to adopt more radical views, which cannot be identified with Awey’s influence alone. An example is the CIC judgement of the New Year celebrations in 2004, as an criminal
offence that should be punished by death. One year later, the militia from several courts shut down cinemas in northern Mogadishu accusing them of showing immoral Western and Indian films. Although the influence of an extremist minority was obvious, “most courts appear to exist for chiefly pragmatic purposes.”

More importantly, in 2004 and 2005 a jihadi militia, the shabaab (“youth”) was engaging in a ‘dirty war’ against Somalis they suspected to collaborate with the TFG, Ethiopia and/or the US in counter terrorist operations. The shabaab was responsible for three (or four) assassination attempts on TFG Prime Minister Ghedi and President Yusuf. By mid-2005, the CIC was the strongest political and military force in Mogadishu, although the actions of shabaab had tarnished its image.

In an increasingly secure environment in Mogadishu mid-2005 something unexpected happened: a popular uprising reclaimed the public sphere and politics gained an element of “people power”. Women’s groups for example, surrounded roadblocks until they surrendered and the media publicly denounced the militia leaders and others responsible for Somalia’s instability and violence. As this new “peoples’ power” was not in the interest of the Islamist, militia and political elite, they tried to neutralize this new actor. This was not difficult, because the grass roots movement was unorganized and spontaneous. After the assassination of a leading peace activist in July 2005, this singular and promising chapter in Somalia’s recent history was ended.

The pragmatic coalition between Mogadishu’s Islamists and its warlords against the TFG ended by October 2005, as the TFG (now located in Baidoa because Mogadishu was too dangerous) looked to be less and less of a threat. The TFG on the other hand, tried to extend its influence and attract support from the US by stressing its anti-terrorist agenda. It was in the late year of 2005 that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) detected leading al-Qaeda operatives in Somalia, among them Fazul Abdullah Mohammed of the Comoros Islands, probably the most important al-Qaeda operative in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as three to five al Qaeda operatives that were involved in the 1998 embassy bombings.

At this point, the CIA was searching for partnerships with non-state actors in counter-terrorism monitoring and rendition. These local partners consisted of businessmen, militia leaders and warlords. But these allies were local rivals that often clashed with each other. Under US pres-
sure and with US financial support, they formed the Alliance for Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism in February 2006. It did not take long before the Alliance and the CIC were fighting each other. In the three month long war in Mogadishu that followed, the Islamists won nearly every battle and in June 2006, most of the Alliance militia surrendered and joined the Islamists while their commanders escaped to Ethiopia and Kenya. This staunch victory by the CIC was exactly the opposite of what the US had hoped for and it was the very first time in 16 years that Mogadishu was governed under one single leadership.47

After their victory the CIC took highly symbolic and public action, by removing road blocks, clearing the enormous amount of rubbish in Mogadishu’s streets that had not been cleared for over a decade, reopening the airport and seaport in Mogadishu, and also establishing special courts to deal with the restitution of property. Their declared goal was to install a new form of governance in Somalia, through the application of Sharia law. At the same time, the rhetoric from some CIC officials became increasingly militant. They constantly attacked the TFG in Baidoa, as well as the status of the Republic of Somaliland under a future Somalia. In the same vein, Sheikh Aweys’s criticism of Ethiopia’s involvement in Somalia was very militant. This constituted the increased perception that the CIC represented an actual threat to their neighboring states.48 Nonetheless the CIC had the momentum on its side, “throughout Somalia, there was a widespread sense of inevitability about Islamist ascendance and expansion across the rest of the country.”49 Besides the military victory over the Alliance in Mogadishu, the CIC’s greatest success was the widespread public support it enjoyed as an administration. This “performance legitimacy” stood in contrast to the other regional administrations and their bad records. In this context, the CIC appeared to many Somalis as the solution to the past 16 years of state collapse.

Nevertheless, in their attempt to consolidate power over the whole of Somalia, the CIC had to face the external spoiler of neighboring Ethiopia and its internal divisions, i.e. problems with internal organization, ideological differences and clan troubles.50

The CIC brought together people from moderate and extreme wings of political Islam, “ranging from traditional sufi figures like Sheikh Sharif, to hardline salafists like Aweys, to committed jihadists in the shabaab militia.”51 Although popular support was widespread, it was not deep, as one could see
after the first losses the CIC suffered against the Ethiopian army in December 2006. Most of the internal maladies could already be observed with the above described radical Islamist movements in Somalia in the years before:

- Some authoritarian tendencies could be noted despite the CIC’s public statements about promoting peace and democracy. There were edicts against critical media reporting and political gathering, and harsh restrictions on female participation in the political process. The ban on showing the Football World Cup was also widely reported. (However, the CIC was far from an oppressive regime like the Taliban.) The CIC’s concentration of power seemed to accruing with the hardliners of the movement, as most of the weapons and financial support of the courts were controlled by Aweys.52

- The CIC was obviously overstretched with the need for new internal organization that came along with the new role the CIC achieved. It established an executive committee and an advisory committee, the shura, but it was not clear how these should interact. This lack of a functioning internal organization led to decisions and public statements that often contradicted each other, as they were made by local militia leaders without a decision-making process of the collective CIC body. This was a challenge for external actors as well, as they did not know what the “official” CIC position was.53

- Also the CIC faced problems in its relationships with the courts. The CIC was very much national and cross-clan in its scope, but the Hawiye were the main support base of the CIC. The Hawiye are one of the four major clan families in Somalia, and they dominate the increasingly wealthy and powerful business elite in the country. Nonetheless, they were not able to establish their real power because of internal differences, like the devastating war in 1992 between General Aideed and Ali Mahdi (both Hawiye). Menkhaus points out, that the war between the CIC and the Alliance in the first half of 2006, was also an internal Hawiye struggle. The CIC’s victory gave the Hawiye a united political front. Some of the CIC’s leadership wanted to broaden its clan base, to include Aweys, in order to succeed in their goal of
establishing a true pan-Somali movement. But the Hawiye were eager not to see their special influence weakened by new clans joining the CIC.\textsuperscript{54}

As described above, the pivotal issue for the US was the alleged safe haven for a handful of al Qaeda operative in Mogadishu. The US tried to talk to the CIC, but the CIC was not willing to accept the US concerns. Particularly Aweys was consistently dismissive. He and other hardliners, started what seemed like a systematic campaign to provoke further tensions with Ethiopia and make a conflict inevitable, including the call for jihad against Ethiopia and the claims for the Ogaden region. With hindsight, it is not clear if the CIC hardliners actually wanted a war, or only the threat of war to improve their domestic standing.

In late December 2006, Ethiopia officially invaded Somalia (with US intelligence help) and even occupied Mogadishu, where the population faced the worst fighting in 15 years. The CIC militia diffused into the general population; there was only minor direct fighting.\textsuperscript{55} What followed was an “Iraq style” militant jihadist insurgency from the underground against the Ethiopian invaders, as well as against their local TFG allies and there was political opposition from the CIC’s political wing that fled to Asmara in Eritrea. Although the Islamists could not survive in a direct confrontation with the Ethiopian army - one of the best-trained armies in Sub-Saharan Africa - and they were considerably weakened, they could rely on the backing of a huge section of the population.\textsuperscript{56} As the “revolutionary impulse of the Courts movement had been spent”, and also the TFG de facto had disintegrated because of internal struggles by the end of 2007, Somalia went back to the pre-Courts period: power has returned to the local level and various war lords now represent their sub-clans and struggle over their influence.\textsuperscript{57}

(POLITICAL) ISLAM’S ROLE IN THE NEW SOMALI ECONOMY

Somalia’s economy was relatively lively after the state’s collapse. Islam (more than political Islam) has played an ambiguous role in reshaping the economy during the civil war. The explicitly Islamic character of many enterprises raised concerns especially in the United States about political Islam’s capacity in Somalia in developing their own economy, as many members of al-Itihaad became leading entrepreneurs in the country. According
to the Crisis Group this can be explained by al-Itihaad head start during the civil war, as it received very early funding from Islamist charities abroad and became well connected. A considerable number of al-Itihaad members therefore used this position to start their own businesses.\textsuperscript{58}

A good example is the Somali remittance and telecommunication company al-Barakaat that was accused by the US of direct links to al-Qaida. On 7 November 2001, the US froze their assets and placed the chairman and the director of the company on their list of terrorist suspects (the ban was lifted in late 2002). The accusation was that al-Barakaat passed funds of about $25 million a year to the al-Qaeda network. No public evidence was presented and many experts like Ken Menkhaus questioned this US assessment and action.\textsuperscript{59} A closer look at al-Barakaat’s history provides some inside into Islam’s role in Somalia’s new economy.

For at least the last two decades, Somalia’s economy has heavily depended on remittances from the widespread Diaspora in Arab countries, Europe and North America. It is difficult to estimate the annual money flow. Estimations vary between $300 and $500 million a year in the last decade. Between a quarter and 35% of the population depend on these remittances, which therefore also have a huge impact on the economy. In some rural areas remittances are absolutely crucial for the survival of many families.\textsuperscript{60}

Al-Barakaat is the leading Somali money-transfer company. It seems to have established its position around 1992 and 1994, and since then has been the most important money-transfer company in South Somalia. The owners of the company seem to be – according to the Wall Street Journal - an Islamic banking conglomerate of whom at least some just share an economic agenda.\textsuperscript{61} The company functions as others do in this sector: local investors guarantee the safety of the investment and get a share of the profits.

Nonetheless, al-Barakaat had a rather peculiar policy in respect to their workers clan affiliation and in their understanding of Islam, which can be better understood in the context of their economic engagement. To obtain clan protection if a potential conflict occurs, it employed kinsmen of the manager (a normal policy in Somalia today), but it also employed religious people from all other clans with a special bias on Salafi Islam. It is not clear where this special focus on Salafi Islam comes from\textsuperscript{62}, but Marchal notes that, “one must recognize that this form of Islam has been widely practiced on the other side of the Red Sea without creating any US or international concerns.”\textsuperscript{63}
Besides this distinct feature, the company acted as all other companies in the business. It sponsored many Islamic NGO projects for regular and Qur’anic schools. There is no evidence for any sympathy to al-Itihaad, but like others, it provided telephone lines and mobiles for leadership. As many secular business people, al-Barakaat funded the Islamic Courts in the South of Mogadishu. Marchal gives also an insightful example of how the label of a “terrorist” is used to undermine opponents. At a certain point, the General Hussein Aydiid started to link publicly al-Barakaat to al-Itihaad and to al Qaeda. This was the case when Aydiid and al-Barakaat got into confrontation, because Aydiid’s debts to the telephone company exceeded $40,000.

As the ban in 2001 was lifted by the US one year later without a transparent legal process or an explanation, it seems that a rather superficial assessment of the company’s Salafi bias was the reason for the action against it, as well as its distinct network with even 10 branches in the US.

CONCLUSION

Is Somalia in its current situation a fertile ground for radical Islamic groups? Indeed the accelerated growth of Islamic activism since the break down of the Somali state and the beginning of the civil war in the early 1990’s cannot be denied. However Islamic activism in Somalia cannot be equated with extremism and terrorism, but should rather be seen as a reaction to the challenges the Somali society faces in an “anarchic”, insecure environment and all the basic and daily problems and threats that go hand in hand with these developments. In this situation, Islamic groups of different inclinations proved themselves able to play a stabilizing role. The Islamic courts are the best example in this respect. At the same time Islamists organizations and NGO’s offer practical solutions (comparable to Hizbollah and Hamas) to social problems by successfully running schools and hospitals, i.e. public services, secular entities are not able, or willing to supply.

As the examples of the recent years show, radical political views are opposed by the majority of the Somali people, even if the Islamists gained performance legitimacy because of their capacity to build a secure environment. The biggest challenge Islam and Islamist face in Somalia is the distinct nature of the clan system. As shown above, Islamic organizations seem to be incapable of overcoming clan politics in the long run and seem therefore
not able to gain long run political dominance, as they face the same challenges as all the other entities that group themselves along sub-clan lines.

This also seems to be the most substantial reason, why Somalia, contrary to the general public view, is not a fertile ground for Islamic extremism, although several attempts can be found where extremist wings in different Islamic organizations tried to gain power and establish a theocratic state. Their continued failure to do so, also shows that they do not find a broad and deep base among the Somali population.

In this context, the continued assumption among main international actors, that Somalia is a safe haven for al-Qaeda seems to be based more on superficial structural reasoning (“another failed state like Afghanistan”) than on a deep understanding of Somalia’s realities on the ground, as the example of the US freeze on the al-Barakaat assets shows. Its chronic insecurity, the highly fractious nature of the Somali clan system, the desperate levels of poverty, as well as the relatively un-ideological, pragmatic nature of Somali people do not seem to be an attractive place for radical networks such as al-Qaeda. In fact, even bin Laden came to the conclusion that the Somali clan militias were too untrustworthy to provide security when he was looking for his next stop after Sudan in 1996. Therefore Somalia could only be a place for short term actions or transitions of radical Islamist networks. The diverse nature of Islam in Somalia and its complex clan nature cannot be understand and dealt with by resorting to simplified patterns.

NOTES

Geopolitics of the Middle East

Translation by Ulf Terlinden.

19 Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Al Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa, Harmony Project, (2007), p. 79.
22 On 23 September 2001 President Bush signed Executive Order 13224 to block the assets of 27 organizations and individuals linked to terrorism. Al-Itihaad was tenth on the list.
23 Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Al Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa, op. cit., p. 79.
26 International Crisis Group, Somalia’s Islamists, op. cit., p. 8-9; Combat-
ing Terrorism Center at West Point, Al Qaida’s (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa, op. cit., p. 79.
31 Marchal, “Islamic Political Dynamics in the Somali Civil War”, op. cit., p. 133.
33 Marchal, “Islamic Political Dynamics in the Somali Civil War”, op. cit., p. 137.
34 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
41 In Puntland both Abdillahi Yusuf and Sheikh Hassan Aweys tried to kill each other. It was also Yusuf who crushed an al-Itihaad training camp in Puntland and drove the Islamists across the red Sea to Yemen and in the south versus Mogadishu. See: The Economist, “Not the new Taliban, yet”, 29. June 2006.
43 Ibid.
48 Cedric Barnes and Harum Hassan, “The Rise and Fall of Mogadishu’s...
52 Ibid. p. 372.
58 International Crisis Group, Somalia’s Islamists, op. cit., p. 23.
62 Crisis Group asserts that this religious aura inspired confidence and trust in al-Barkaat’s clientel, though some Somali were suspicious about this distinct religious bias of a private company. See: International Crisis Group, Somalia’s Islamists, op. cit., p. 24.
63 Marchal, “Islamic Political Dynamics in the Somali Civil War”, op. cit., p. 141.
64 International Institute for Strategic Studies IISS, Strategic Survey 2007, op. cit., p. 257.