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How to Respond to Somalia's Current Crisis

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August 2006

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The U.S. Institute of Peace convened a half-day roundtable discussion for 13 Somali intellectuals in late July in order to develop consensus recommendations for how the international community should understand and respond to the current crisis in Somalia. The consultation was chaired by Professor Hussein Adam of the College of the Holy Cross. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the principal conclusions reached by the participants.

Among the group's conclusions:

- The international community should strongly discourage other states, like Ethiopia, from sending troops into Somalia, even if invited to do so by Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The Somali population is very fearful of the agendas of Ethiopia and other foreign powers.
- The United States should engage the Supreme Islamic Council of Somalia (SICS), which controls most of southern Somalia, and encourage dialogue between SICS and TFG.
- The crisis in Somalia is much more complicated than simply conflict between Islamic extremists and moderates. U.S. policy toward Somalia must be more all-encompassing than a narrow focus on terrorism.

Background to the Current Crisis

Somalia has been stateless since 1991 when the Siad Barre regime was overthrown but not replaced by a viable alternative. In October 1993, 18 U.S. army rangers were killed in Mogadishu by forces loyal to the late General Mohamed Farah Aideed. Since then, Somalia has been largely off the foreign policy agenda of the United States. Fifteen national reconciliation conferences over the past 14 years have failed to generate a state capable of establishing law and order for the whole country. A major reason for this failure is that powerful Somali warlords insist on maintaining their bases of power. The TFG arose out of the last reconciliation conference in Nairobi, concluded in 2005. But the TFG has been unable to assert control very far beyond its base in Baidoa. In recent months a rival Islamic coalition, formerly called the Union of Islamic Courts and now called SICS, gained control over Mogadishu and most of southern Somalia. Fearing that SICS is harboring al-Qaeda operatives and is likely to establish a Taliban-style state in Somalia, the U.S. allegedly provided support to warlords opposed to SICS, but SICS defeated these warlords. At the request of TFG, Ethiopia has recently sent troops to Baidoa to protect TFG from possible attack by SICS. There are suspicions that Eritrea might be providing support to SICS as a counterweight to Ethiopia.

SICS and its constituent units have brought greater stability to the areas where they operate, and gained public support by establishing courts that have reduced crime. Moreover, the courts provide social and educational services not offered by others. The Islamic court movement developed as both a backlash to the anarchy of warlordism and as a yearning for law and order.

Recommendations

As a coalition of courts and with a fluid leadership structure, it is still uncertain what SICS will evolve into. Its position on Shariah and other approaches to governance are not yet clear. There has been some foreign influence on SICS that might point it toward adopting an Islamist agenda and promoting an Islamic state. But the vast majority of Somalis subscribe to a tolerant form of Islam. Any hardcore Islamic extremism will most likely collide with anti-authority individualistic Somali nomadic independence. If SICS becomes controlled by Islamic radicals, that will be cause for serious concern both for Somalis and for the international community. Moreover, if SICS harbors or protects any terrorists, that must also be addressed. Terrorists should be expelled from Somalia or turned over to international authorities.

Somali women will be particularly vulnerable if SICS promotes a rigid Islamist agenda. Every effort must be exerted to make sure that women's rights are protected and that women play an active role in Somalia's governance. Women's efforts to advance their rights should be encouraged.

The international community should encourage both the TGF and the SICS to protect other socially vulnerable groups and to respect minority rights.

Both because SICS will be a major force in shaping Somalia's future and because its leadership and program are still evolving, the U.S. should engage SICS while being explicit in its concerns about terrorists. U.S. policy toward Somalia must be more all-encompassing than a narrow focus on terrorism. In approaching SICS, the United States should consider incentives which could encourage the evolution of SICS in a moderate direction. One participant stated, "The international community could devise incentives that make it worthwhile for the SICS to bring about democracy and not to usurp power unilaterally."

The international community should maintain the arms embargo currently imposed on all parties. Exporting arms into Somalia or providing external military support to one party or another will only add fuel to the conflict.

The international community should also encourage dialogue between SICS and TFG like that taking place in Khartoum. It might be possible to achieve a bloodless accommodation between these two bodies.

While Western analysts have tended to interpret the current crisis as between Islamist extremists and moderate Islam, some participants noted that the crisis is also rooted in clan rivalries and sub-clan conflicts. Competition among clans has shaped the conflict in Mogadishu and surrounding areas.

Conflict between SICS and TFG is rooted in clan rivalries as well. These participants advocated a process of grassroots clan reconciliation organized inside Somalia. The Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), the east African regional organization, which convened the Nairobi conference in 2005, should not organize or host the next reconciliation process. Nor should Ethiopia. Both IGAD and Ethiopia tend to shape the outcome of Somalia peace talks to serve their own interests. One participant stated, "Ultimately, it is up to the Somali people to choose a path for their country that leaves the violence and anarchy behind and brings lasting peace to their people." Somaliland participants noted that their political experience might offer some useful lessons for negotiations, peacebuilding, and elections in Somalia.

Even though the Nairobi reconciliation conference had limited success, the draft constitution developed there may be able, with some revisions, to form the basis for a Somali constitution. Some modest amendments might also satisfy the SICS leadership without laying the basis for an Islamist state. A revised constitution might state that Islam would be the principal source of legislation without stating that Islam will be the sole source of legislation.

The international community, with the U.S. taking the lead, should strongly urge Ethiopia to withdraw its troops from Somalia. Similarly, Eritrea should be cautioned against aiding any party. Somalis are generally distrustful of Ethiopia and its meddling in Somali affairs. A major reason that the TFG has lost credibility is that it invited Ethiopia to send troops to Baidoa. Ethiopia's backing of TFG generates popular support for SICS. Ethiopia's intervention may also motivate Eritrea to support SICS, with Somalia becoming another stage for the Ethiopia/Eritrea conflict.

Roundtable participants:

Dr. Hussein Adam, Chair	Abdulkadir Aden Abdulle
Dr. Abdinur S. Mohamud	Osman Sahardeed
Dr. Ahmed N. Abdi	Saeed Megag Samater
Faduma Ahmed Alim	Dr. Ali N. Mohamed
Ladan Affi	(Dr. Bereket Habte Sellassie - resource)
Dr. Mohamed Haji Mukhtar	Yussur Abrar
Dr. Abdi Kusow	

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[Restoring Hope: The Real Lessons of Somalia for the Future of Intervention](#)

Special Report, 1995

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