

Somalia After the Ethiopian Occupation

First steps to end the conflict and combat extremism

By Ken Menkhaus February 2009

President Barack Obama has inherited a dangerous and fast-moving crisis in Somalia—one with profound implications for regional and international security. While some within the new administration will be tempted to continue to place short-term counterterrorism goals ahead of a more comprehensive strategy approach as was done during the Bush administration, the shortcomings of this approach are abundantly clear: violent extremism and anti-Americanism are now rife in Somalia due in large part to the blowback from policies that focused too narrowly on counterterrorism objectives. The new U.S. national security team must make a clean break by defining and implementing a long-term strategy to support the development of an inclusive Somali government.

Building on the recent creation of a more broad-based transitional parliament, and its selection of Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, a moderate Islamist, as president of Somalia's transitional government, the United States should immediately bolster its diplomatic engagement in the region and assign a senior diplomat to drive U.S. policy and harmonize its counterterrorism and state-building agendas. At the same time, the United States should work multilaterally to provide focused, conditional support to expand the legitimacy, inclusiveness, accountability, and capacity of Sheikh Sharif's fledgling government. It must make clear that it will provide sustained support to the general principles of reconciliation, consensus-building, power-sharing, and moderation, but not support to specific individuals or factions.

U.S. policymakers must approach Somalia with humility. Somalia has been much more susceptible to negative external forces than positive ones over the last two decades. U.S. engagement will only prove effective if it is driven by sound analysis, sound policies, and a willingness to invest in the hard work of local consensus building. The Obama administration must adopt a clear set of core principles and interests, develop a better understanding of regional and local political dynamics, and take a more pragmatic, nuanced approach to dealing with local actors that works with rather than against powerful social and political undercurrents within Somalia. Given Somalia's deeply dysfunctional state, policy choices may often have to be a matter of selecting the least-worst options. In addition, the U.S. government will also need to engage in much more effective public diplomacy if it hopes to reverse high levels of anti-Americanism and convince ordinary Somalis that the United States shares their interest in peace and stability.

New dangers and opportunities in 2009

As the Enough Project chronicled in its most recent report, U.S. policy under the Bush administration helped push the crisis in Somalia to catastrophic dimensions. An Ethiopian military intervention in Somalia in December 2006 succeeded in ousting an increasingly radical Islamist movement, the Islamic Courts Union, but provoked a brutal cycle of insurgency and counterinsurgency that plunged the country into new depths of misery. As conflict raged and humanitarian conditions spiraled downward, flawed U.S. policies only strengthened the Islamist shabaab movement and its commitment to attack Ethiopian and western and United Nations interests, as well as regional governments collaborating with the United States. This homegrown terrorist threat emanating from Somalia has the potential to become even more dangerous than the East Africa Al Qaeda cell that was responsible for the 1998 terrorist attacks against U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. And as the recent epidemic of piracy off the Somali coast demonstrates—as did Afghanistan earlier this decade—the cost of ignoring failed states can be very high.

Several major developments present both new opportunities and new risks for Somalia and the Horn of Africa in 2009.

The Ethiopian withdrawal: Ethiopia has made good on its decision to withdraw its military forces from Somalia, a move which has transformed the political landscape in Somalia. The worst fears that the shabaab would consolidate control over the capital Mogadishu—a fear the Bush administration sought to exploit at the eleventh hour with a failed push for authorization of a U.N. peacekeeping force through the U.N. Security Council—have not materialized. On the contrary, the Ethiopian withdrawal has the potential to dramatically reduce violence and defuse radicalism by removing the presence of a “foreign occupier” which Somalis of all stripes resented and which fueled the insurgency. It also promises to strengthen the coalition of moderates from the Transitional Federal Government, or TFG, and opposition groups—including many Islamists—who signed the Djibouti Peace Agreement in the summer of 2008. That coalition will now enjoy greater legitimacy for having delivered the Ethiopian withdrawal, while the shabaab will have lost its main adversary and rallying point. Periodic Ethiopian incursions into Somalia are inevitable, but are unlikely to be sustained and will hopefully not undermine the new transitional government.

President Yusuf’s resignation: Under sustained pressure from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Western countries, TFG President Abdullahi Yusuf resigned in December 2008. Yusuf was a deeply polarizing figure in Somalia, a hardliner who actively sought to block implementation of the Djibouti Agreement and who specialized in a particularly divisive style of clan politics. He was widely viewed as a major impediment to peace in Somalia, a conclusion eventually reached by his former patron, Ethiopia. Yusuf’s departure opened the door for progress toward implementation of the Djibouti Agreement and the building of a broad-based coalition government. It also robs the shabaab of another important rallying point.

Formation of a new government: On January 31, 2009, an expanded transitional federal parliament met in Djibouti and selected a new president, Sheikh Sharif Ahmed. Sheikh Sharif’s selection signals a major power shift in the TFG toward the moderate Islamists within the former Islamic Courts Union. However, as Enough argued in a recent release, the process of appointing an expanded parliament was very problematic, and risks de-legitimizing the new government in the eyes of many Somalis since little time was allotted for consultations or consensus build-

ing among key groups ranging from civil society to armed factions. It is also not yet sufficiently broad-based; important Somali constituencies currently feel marginalized in the government, a problem President Sharif must address as he forms a new cabinet. Nonetheless, the formation of a post-Yusuf government offers the promise of a more broad-based administration which, if successful, should be able to negotiate with parts of the armed insurgency and contain the rest.

A new U.S. administration: With the arrival of a new administration in the United States, a window of opportunity clearly exists to reverse the very high levels of anti-Americanism prevailing in Somalia. Most Somalis were deeply impressed with the election of an African-American president, are hopeful for a change in U.S. policy, and, if the Obama administration takes the appropriate steps, could quickly shift attitudes toward the U.S. government. Moreover, the new face of the American government also deprives the shabaab of some of its ability to demonize the United States.

Resistance to Islamic extremists: Armed groups, organized mainly around clan but in some cases Islamism, have actively resisted the shabaab's attempts to gain control of some neighborhoods and key sites in Mogadishu. This is an important indication that the shabaab was tolerated, and enjoyed some support, when it posed as the main source of resistance to Ethiopian occupation, but is not acceptable to most Somalis as a source of political leadership once that existential threat has been removed. While it is still too early to say, there is a good chance that the shabaab reached its high water mark in late 2008, and is now facing resistance from Somali constituencies and struggling with internal fissures.

Successful selection of new government in Puntland: The northeastern polity of Puntland, long a zone of relative stability and economic recovery in Somalia, suffered dangerous political and security deterioration over the past two years, threatening to slide into violent anarchy. It also became the hub of the world's worst piracy epidemic. But last month the Puntland Parliament selected a new President, Abdirahman "Farole," resisting efforts by the incumbent faction to manipulate the election. The election raises hopes that Puntland can reverse its worrisome slide and can re-establish public order.

Now what? Possible scenarios for the coming months

Taken together, these new developments have created a dramatically different political and security landscape in Somalia, and they add to already high levels of uncertainty about the direction the country will take next. The three most likely scenarios to emerge in the coming months are:

Violent stalemate: The most likely scenario, and the one in which Somalia finds itself right now in the aftermath of the Ethiopian withdrawal and Yusuf resignation, is a bloody stalemate in which the country remains divided into fiefdoms held by warring Islamists, clans, warlords, and self-declared national and local administrations. The shabaab and other Islamists groups will be the strongest groups but would not be in a position to overrun or dislodge rivals, and will fight among themselves. The transitional government will remain dysfunctional and will complete its five-year mandate in late 2009 without having achieved any of the goals of the transition.

Incremental success by the new unity government: A post-Yusuf, post-occupation unity government is Somalia's best hope to end its current catastrophe. Success is by no means assured. Indeed, most observers consider it a long shot at this time. The newly formed government

now led by Sheikh Sharif has yet to form a cabinet and select a new prime minister; faces sharp criticism from civic, business, and militia leaders who were not adequately consulted about the expansion of the new Parliament; and faces significant armed resistance, especially in the form of the shabaab, which openly rejects the Djibouti process and the new government it produced. In a best-case scenario, Sheikh Sharif will be able to win over a pragmatic coalition of Somali businesspeople, clans, civic leaders, and Islamists, while reassuring Ethiopia that the new government seeks coexistence. If this newly constituted TFG can win enough local support, it will be able to hold portions of Mogadishu and south-central Somalia and gradually work to negotiate with parts of the shabaab and militarily defeat the rest. Sheikh Sharif may also be able to revive some level of the administrative capacity demonstrated by the ICU in 2006, providing improved governance in southern Somalia.

Radical Islamist consolidation of power: It remains possible that the new government will not be able to secure adequate alliances from the many clan militias and business groups in country. That could allow the shabaab and other jihadist movements to build tactical alliances, consolidate control over territory they already hold in southern Somalia, and possibly even take control of all of Mogadishu. From a western security perspective, however, a radical Islamist takeover of the capital does not allow those groups to do much more than they already can. The shabaab and related jihadist groups already control ample territory from the Kenyan border to the outskirts of Mogadishu and several important ports and airports, and therefore are in a position to engage in acts of terrorism across Somali borders should they so choose. But the fall of Mogadishu to the shabaab would have significant political consequences; the emergence of an Islamist regime with connections to Al Qaeda would almost certainly set in motion some type of security responses from both Ethiopia and the United States, and it would likely usher in a new chapter of armed conflict and instability.

Toward a more effective U.S. policy

The immediate preference for the Obama administration government is self-evident—it should promote the success of the Djibouti process and the new unity government, while actively preparing a “plan B” in the event the Djibouti process fails and Sheikh Sharif’s government collapses. To formulate a policy that avoids the disasters of previous U.S. engagement, the new administration should take a step back, re-examine old assumptions, and establish basic principles of engagement. This in turn should produce unambiguous objectives and a clear map of how best to achieve these objectives.

Articulating principles for engagement

Effective policy in Somalia must be integrated within a broader strategy to promote regional stability: The Somali crisis is deeply enmeshed in a broader regional dynamic, including Ethiopian-Eritrean tensions and Ethiopia’s domestic politics, including the ongoing counterinsurgency campaign against the Ogaden National Liberation Front in eastern Ethiopia. U.S. policy in the Horn of Africa over the last several years has brushed past these important regional dynamics while making efforts to kill or capture specific individuals responsible for terrorist attacks in the region the paramount objective. Unfortunately, this approach has essentially gone after a symptom of Somalia rather than trying to treat its underlying disease. Even worse, this narrow focus

has consistently exacerbated rather than reduced levels of extremism, anti-Americanism, and jihadism inside Somalia and negatively impacted U.S. relationships in the region. This approach has reduced the U.S.-Ethiopia partnership to an ill-advised quid-pro-quo: Ethiopia helps the U.S. achieve its counterterrorism objectives and, in exchange, the United States has had little to say about the shrinking democratic space inside Ethiopia and the severe human rights abuses committed by the Ethiopian government in both Ethiopia and Somalia.

Ethiopia has legitimate, vital security interests in Somalia and has the capacity to block developments that it views as threatening to its interests. Moreover, Ethiopia's constructive response to the Djibouti Agreement and its support of the creation of a moderate coalition of opposition and TFG leaders suggests that, under the right conditions, ample political space exists to find solutions which are acceptable to both Somalis and the Ethiopian government. The United States must protect and expand this political space, with the aim of building a common political vision of coexistence and shared security and economic interests between Ethiopia and the Somali people. To do this, the United States cannot remain silent in the face of problematic Ethiopian behavior in the region, lest the Obama administration quickly lose its leverage and credibility in the Horn of Africa.

Investing in the time-consuming work of collaboration and consensus building is essential:

Though committed ideologues exist in Somalia, Somali political culture is fundamentally pragmatic in nature, privileging negotiations as the bedrock of politics. The withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, and the resignation of TFG President Yusuf, will deflate radicalism and insurgency in Somalia, reducing (although not eliminating) the regional threat posed by the *shabaab*. The *shabaab*'s main energies will now be devoted toward a power struggle against other Somali political actors. This is a key assumption; if it holds true, it means that successful reduction of the terrorist threat posed by the *shabaab* is more likely to come from changes in Somali politics, not from external military operations.

Policies which privilege Somali-driven processes, rely mainly on Somali interests and actors to drive outcomes, and respect Somali preferences will stand a much better chance of success than those imposed from the outside: External actors, including the United States, have only modest capacities to shape short-term outcomes in Somalia. Though limited, the Obama administration can increase its influence by embarking on a much more sustained and extensive public diplomacy with Somalis across the full spectrum of society and in multiple locations, including in the Gulf states and the Diaspora. Increased engagement with Somalis will not only yield benefits in terms of public attitudes, but will also produce better-informed policy. Indeed, greater reliance on Somali-driven solutions requires much better local knowledge on the part of external actors, including the United States. This will not be easy to achieve given the current high levels of insecurity and threats which have driven almost all foreigners out of south-central Somalia and which have also greatly restricted the Somali press and Somali civil society from reporting on events in the country. Effective Somali policy cannot be conceived or executed if primarily confined to discussion at the State Department and inside the walled compounds of the U.S. Embassy and U.N. agencies in Nairobi.

Policies that maximize space for negotiations are especially valuable; an overreliance on punitive action and isolation reduce the already narrow room for diplomatic maneuver:

The 2008 U.S. designation of the entire *shabaab* movement as a terrorist organization, while debatable on its merits, served to reduce space for Somalis to negotiate, and painted *shabaab*

leaders into a corner from which their only option is to fight. Although some leaders and units in the *shabaab* are certainly extremists and could never be brought into a normal political dialogue, others may well be mainstreamed if conditions are right. This is also true for U.S. policy toward Eritrea, a principal backer of the insurgency in Somalia and a state that has interests in playing the role of spoiler in Somalia as long as it is diplomatically isolated. Designating Eritrea a state sponsor of terror (which the Africa Bureau within the State Department unsuccessfully tried to do during the last days of the Bush administration) would make it almost impossible to engage Eritrea in a constructive dialogue to convince it to cease its proxy war in Somalia.

Articulating U.S. interests and objectives

The United States should articulate the general objectives, processes, and outcomes it would like to see in Somalia, but avoid the temptation to directly back individual Somali leaders at this point in time. Because of high levels of anti-American and anti-Ethiopian sentiments in Somalia, the United States and Ethiopia run the risk of de-legitimizing local actors and processes by supporting and embracing them too overtly. This is especially important with regard to the current political and military resistance to the *shabaab* by a variety of Somali constituencies. This is a positive development, but could be undermined by overt support to those groups.

Put counterterrorism in a broader context: While the United States needs to remain vigilant in its counter-terrorism stance in Somalia, counterterrorism policies must be de-conflicted with other objectives, especially the promotion of a long-term political stability—which is the only way terrorist threats will ultimately subside. The U.S. counterterrorism approach in Somalia has been short-term and tactical in nature, focusing on the immediate need to target and remove “high value” terror suspects and undermining international efforts to address the underlying drivers of violent extremism in the region—statelessness, conflict, poverty, and impunity. Likewise, U.S. counterterrorism actions have deeply compromised humanitarian access for the United Nations and international relief agencies at a time when more than 3 million Somalis need emergency assistance.

Focus on human rights and accountability: A greater U.S. focus on human rights and accountability is imperative, both as a reflection of a core foreign policy principal of the Obama administration and to restore U.S. standing in Somalia. U.S. defense of human rights in Somalia must be universal, not selective, to have credibility among Somalis. Although all sides in the Somali conflict have been guilty of crimes against humanity, the Bush administration was loudly critical of abuses by the armed opposition and silent in the face of gross violation of human rights by the transitional government and Ethiopian forces. The damage this has done to U.S. credibility in the region cannot be overstated. Rightly or wrongly, most Somalis believe the Bush administration was complicit in the human rights abuses and indiscriminate shelling that drove at least 700,000 people from their homes and reduced much of the capital to rubble. Because of the United States’ close relationships with Ethiopia and Kenya, the behavior, those governments’ behavior (in some cases, policies pursued at the behest of the Bush administration) also reflects on the United States and can damage U.S. credibility with Somalis and with the sizable Muslim communities in each country.

Prioritize good governance over capacity building: In Somalia, the central government has a long history of predatory tendencies, and needs to develop a range of basic checks, balances and accountability mechanisms. Yet international support for the transitional government has tended

to emphasize capacity-building at the expense of good governance and adherence to the rule of law. The result was predictable: The TFG was empowered but unrestrained, leading to abuses by police forces directly supported by the United States and the United Nations (among others) and the complete neglect of the task to establishing functioning institutions. Somali civil society, which is key to any peace and reconciliation effort, has been particularly devastated by assassinations and threats from hardliners on both sides.

Reinforce zones of relative peace and recovery in the North while focusing on resolving the crises in south-central Somalia: Efforts to broker an end to war and state collapse in south-central Somalia should not come at the expense of sustained support to consolidate gains in the northern polities of Puntland and Somaliland. The peace and stability of both of those regions have been taken for granted by the international community, and yet are fragile and vulnerable to political setbacks.

A new approach to peacebuilding in Somalia

Despite current levels of violence and extremism prevailing in the country, a negotiated solution to the Somali conflict is possible. A period of armed clashes between the increasingly fragmented collection of Islamists, clan militias, and others is inevitable, but the departure of Ethiopian forces and the selection of a more broad-based government create a much better context for the promotion of dialogue and negotiations. A window of opportunity is opening in Somalia and must not be missed.

Building an improved climate for U.S. engagement in Somalia is an essential first step, and the Obama administration should take the following further steps:

- Articulate clearly to Somali leaders and communities both what the United States aspires to see in Somalia—genuine peace, revival of an accountable and legitimate central government, promotion of economic recovery, and a secure environment for all—as well as the minimal criteria the United States insists upon in order to work with Somali individual leaders and groups. These criteria should include: (1) respecting the peace and security of regional states; (2) avoiding linkage with terrorist organizations; (3) actively working to reduce and eliminate al-Qaeda presence in Somalia; and (4) protecting the physical security of the Somali people and humanitarian aid workers. Some Somali political figures and intellectuals will bristle at the notion of any conditions of engagement being imposed on them, but there is a climate of sober realism in Somalia at present and awareness that failure to be attentive to the basic security needs of neighboring states and the West could plunge the country into continued chaos.
- End the overuse of “red-lining” Somali individuals and groups while providing assurances that any measures designed to pressure Somali actors with punitive action will be applied universally, not selectively. This includes possible targeted sanctions against violators of the U.N. arms embargo. The designation of some groups and individuals as terrorists has been used as a political weapon and has created serious disincentives for those designated as terrorists to modify their positions and seek negotiated settlements.
- Cease U.S. involvement in cross-border renditions between Kenya, Somalia, and Ethiopia and voice public criticism of Ethiopian government abuses in Somali-inhabited Ethiopia.

- Promote accountability by supporting a U.N. commission of inquiry to investigate human rights abuses by all parties to the Somali conflict.

The key role for external actors at this time is not to impose solutions on Somalia but rather to create more permissive conditions for Somali-driven solutions to take hold. Toward that end, the Obama administration must take the following steps:

- Designate a senior diplomat to lead U.S. Somalia policy, base that person in the region, and provide him or her with adequate staffing and resources.
- State its willingness to accept political outcomes that occur beyond the Transitional Federal Government. While there are a variety of reasons why the TFG may be a preferable vehicle for a unity government and a political transition, the TFG's survival and advancement is not essential for a durable solution in Somalia and should not be conflated with it.
- Maintain continuous communication with all significant Somali political, social, and economic actors. The U.S. government must avoid over-reliance on contact with a small number of top leaders and facilitators, both to avoid being perceived as playing favorites and to protect Somali contacts from being portrayed as collaborators. One-off meetings with Somali political and social figures are generally unhelpful, as those sessions are usually dedicated to the airing of grievances and can be fairly corrosive. Repeated engagement provides more time to push beyond the grievances and into constructive dialogue.
- Run interference between Somali political processes and well-meaning international actors who seek to impose external agendas and tired, template-driven solutions in Somalia. The United States should voice confidence that a Somali-driven process is the solution and infuse that conviction in the international community. This should include restraining members of the international community from insisting on boilerplate treaties, charters, and state blueprints designed to remake Somalia in their own likeness. Somali state revival may well take on new and more indigenous forms that are not entirely recognizable to organizations dedicated to state building and rule of law.
- Ensure that Ethiopia is fully involved in whatever capacity it chooses, so that its confident political processes in Somalia are not threatening its interests, and so that Ethiopia is tempted to undermine the process.
- As part of an integrated regional policy, explore quiet overtures to Eritrea to de-escalate tensions and provide that government some incentive not to play the role of spoiler in Somalia.
- Support conflict resolution between Ethiopia and Eritrea, particularly in resolving with finality the border dispute between these two countries.

How to counter terrorism and violent extremism

The Obama administration must remain vigilant about serious security threats emanating from Somalia, both from *shabaab* and the East Africa Al Qaeda cell. But the strategy for diminishing that threat must place greater emphasis on promoting an environment in which home-grown

threats to the United States and its allies lose their legitimacy and appeal and in which foreign terrorist threats are confronted with a highly non-permissive environment. Indeed, the United States and its allies must have confidence that a Somali-led process combining armed conflict, persuasion, co-optation, and negotiation will succeed in eroding the *shabaab's* appeal and capacity. Foreigners attempting to “marginalize hardliners” in Somalia invariably fail, and can discredit erstwhile local allies in the process. And the past several years of direct “kinetic” counterterrorism actions to eliminate terror suspects have had deleterious side effects and should be drawn upon only in extraordinary circumstances.

If Somali communities are convinced that terrorist activities are harmful to their interests, they will engage in community policing and make it much more difficult for both foreigners and *shabaab* to misuse Somali territory. Given the lengthy period of time it will take for an effective Somali police and national security force to develop even in best-case circumstances, community policing is the only option for reducing the threat of transitional terrorism and criminality in Somalia.

The *shabaab* is already in trouble, thanks to the Ethiopian withdrawal, Yusuf’s resignation, and growing resistance from other armed groups in the country. The *shabaab* faces multiple internal divisions—over clan, leadership, tactics, and ideology—which a new unity government can exploit in order to convince parts of the *shabaab* to abandon the movement and gradually outmaneuver, marginalize, and defeat the core hardliners. It also runs the risk of having its most powerful ideological card—Somali nationalist, anti-foreigner sentiment—turned against it, as domestic adversaries accuse it of being a puppet of foreign jihadists bringing more trouble to the country.

Conclusion

The elements of a new strategy for Somali policy proposed in this paper share a common confidence in the ability of Somali actors to manage and resolve the country’s long-running crisis if provided a more conducive environment. It assigns principal responsibility to the United States and its allies to help promote, protect, and expand an enabling environment for Somali negotiations take place and community policing to emerge. It charts a middle way between disengagement and heavy-handed, direct intervention in Somalia, recognizing that Somalia’s crisis cannot be solved by foreigners but that Somalis cannot resolve the crisis without well-conceived assistance from outside, and an end to neighbor states using Somalia as a proxy battleground. This call for more informed, indirect, and surgical engagement on the part of the Obama administration and other external actors reflects an approach that is intended to work with rather than against powerful political and social undercurrents in the country, and one that taps into many of the very effective traditions of skilled negotiation, compromise, and pragmatism that have long been the hallmark of Somali political culture.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

