Transnational Islamist (Jihadist) Movements and Inter-State Conflicts in the Horn of Africa

By M.A. Mohamed Salih

Somalia has engendered the policy debate on the extent of the spread of transnational Islamist Jihadist groups in the Horn of Africa (HOA) and their consequences for peace and security across the region. These concerns are justified given the emergence since the late 1980s of extremist groups such as the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement and the Somali Jihadist Islamist groups of the likes of Al-Ittihad, the Islamic Courts Union and currently Al Shabab. The leaders and fighters of these groups relocated to the HOA after the defeat of the Taliban following the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan. The operations of these transnational Islamist groups within and across the countries of the Horn pose serious challenges to the region and beyond.

Background

The majority of the population of the HOA, delimited here by Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan, is Muslim.[1] This fact is not meant to mystify the diversity as well as the distinguishing characteristics of the Islamic social movements of the region and Islamic political doctrines, ranging from the most extreme to moderate. Likewise, the fact that Islam is the majority faith in the HOA should not be seen as denying or obscuring its coexistence with non-Muslim populations – Christian and Jewish as well as a mosaic of traditional beliefs.[2]

For example, the Sudan Muslim Brotherhood has been transnational from its inception. Established in 1954, the Brotherhood was under the influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and the teachings of its leaders, Hassan Al Bana and Sayyid Qotb. Upon his return from his studies in London and Paris (in 1964), Hassan Al-Turabi became a leading figure in the resistance against the military government of General Ibrahim Aboud and the war in South Sudan. The Islamic Charter Front (ICF) was founded in October 1964, with Hassan al-Turabi as its secretary general. The ICF was, a few decades later in 1985, replaced by the National Islamic Front (NIF). The NIF enjoyed relative electoral success by winning 10 per cent of the votes in the 1985 Sudanese parliamentary election, which was sufficient to make it the kingmaker during the formation of any coalition government.[3]

However, when the NIF sensed the imminent repeal of Islamic sharia by the two main parties in the coalition, the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionists, it seized power in 1989,[4] expanding its regional as well as global outreach. Sudan under the NIF offered residency to Arab or Muslim liberation movements and Jihadists, a policy that allowed Bin Laden to live in Khartoum,[5] and facilitated the migration of large numbers of Mujahideen from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, Somalia and Eritrea to support Sudan's war efforts against the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) in South Sudan.[6]

In 1991, Turabi founded the Popular Arab and Islamic Conference (PAIC) under the auspices of the NIF as a forum of Islamic groups, including radical organisations such as the Egyptian Jihad Organisation, Algeria Islamic Jihad, the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement, the Somali Islamic Jihad, Hamas and Hezbollah. As a result, in 1993 the US designated Sudan a state that sponsored terrorism. With his ousting from the leadership of the National Congress Party (NCP) following an attempt to reduce Bashir's presidential powers and block his re-election as president in 1999, Turabi lost his position as Guide of Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood.

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1. Haggai 2010.
2. Ibid.
3. Hasan Maki Muhammad Ahmad, nd., El-Affendi 1991; and Burr and Collins 2003.

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4. Ahmed Abdel Ghaffar M. 2008, p. 7.
5. For more on the Bin Laden years in Sudan see, The September 11 Commission Report, 24 April 2007, pp. 57-8. However, under pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia, Bin Laden was requested to leave the Sudan in 1996, whence he headed to Afghanistan, established an alliance with the Taliban and intensified its Jihad activities, including the 11 September attacks in the US.
6. International Crisis Group 2006.

Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM)

The Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM) emerged in 1975 as an offshoot of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), but formally established itself as an independent organisation in the 1980s. EIJM attracted some dedicated followers from Eritrea and among other Muslims in the HOA, including a few Oromo and Somali Muslims.[7]

As the proxy war between the Marxist military regime of Mengistu Haile Meriam and the Sudan Socialist Union regime of the late President Ghaffar Muhammad Numeri intensified during the late 1980s, EIJM and other radical Salfi movements established themselves in the Sudan, including Jabhat Tahrir al-Iritriya al-Islamiyya al-Wataniya (The National Eritrean Islamic Liberation Front), Munzamat al-Ruwwad al-Muslimin al-Iritria (The Organisation of Eritrean Pioneer Muslims) and al-Intifada al-Islamiyya (Islamic Awakening).[8] Although EIJM's appeal was sufficient to attract similar-minded Islamist organisations into cooperating with or joining it, by the end of the 1990s EIJM had begun to splinter into several organisations, each operating independently (for example, the Eritrean Islamic Reform Movement, the Abu Suhail organisation, the Eritrean Islamic Salvation Movement and the Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development).[9] Eritrean radical Islamist organisations use Islam as an ideology of national liberation.

Al-Ittihad Al-Islami: A Triumph of Illusion

Al-Ittihad al-Islami emerged during the early 1980s out of an alliance between Wahdat al-Shabab al-Islami (Unity of Islamic Youth) and al-Jama`a al-Islamiya, thus transforming itself from a peaceful dawa in political opposition to the Siad Barre regime into a militant organisation engaged in armed conflict after the collapse of the Somali state.[10]

By the 1990s, Al-Ittihad had spread its activities to Ethiopia's Ogaden region and established ties with militant Islamist groups, including al-Qaeda members based in Afghanistan and Sudan. Al-Ittihad's leaders could be described as graduates of Saudi Arabian Salafi Islam who combined the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood with Wahhabi militancy, and were determined to establish an Islamic emirate in Somalia and expand it to the rest of the HOA.[11]

Al-Ittihad's activities in the Ogaden brought it into confrontation with the Ethiopian government. It was alleged that Al-Ittihad had military camps for training Islamist guerrillas from Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya and Uganda in a variety of activities, including the use of small arms, guerrilla warfare, suicide bombing, mines and explosives, espionage and logistics.[12] The Ethiopian government's retaliation in 1997 was swift and unrelenting, dislodging Al-Ittihad from Ethiopia and destroying its bases in Somalia. Although Al-Ittihad was dismantled, its leaders returned to Mogadishu, where they created a new more militant movement with links to global Jihadist organisations.[13]

The Islamic Courts Union (ICU)

The emergence of the ICU coincided with the collapse of the Siad Barre regime and the dismantling of the Somali state by competing clan-based movements/militias, which failed to reconcile their differences and return the country to normalcy.[14] The ICU was led by Sharif Shiekh Ahmed, and was supported byYusuf "Indho Ade" Mohamed Siad, a Somali warlord who controlled Lower Shabelle.

The ICU offered an alternative court and police system capable of ending the chaos that characterised Mogadishu for years and bringing order, thereby bridging the severe governance deficit left by the collapse of the Somali state.[15] It also offered public services previously considered to be under the purview of the state or NGOs both secular and religious, such as health and education.

By 1999, the ICU became the only recognisable source of security for the residents of the areas which it controlled. The measures it took included the creation of an Islamic Union Court police and militia organisation, and the expansion of its activities to include controlling Mogadishu market and the major routes linking the capital with important trade routes throughout Somalia.[16] These steps were followed by the introduction of a strict variant of Islamic sharia, including the banning of football.[17] The combined forces of Sharif Shiekh Ahmed and Yusuf "Indho Ade" Mohamed Siad, with the latter serving as head of military operations, controlled most of southern Somalia, including the capital and the all-important port of Kismayo.

In response, the Somali warlords, supported by the Bush administration, were united for the first time in resisting ICU's hegemony. This new-found unity was also an act of self-preservation by the warlords, who formed an umbrella organisation, the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism (ARPCT). However, ARPCT was no match for the ICU, which by 2006 controlled large expanses of Somali territory after inflicting several major defeats on the US-backed warlords.[18]

Whether acting on its own accord, in order to halt Eritrea's involvement in its south-eastern frontier regions, or

7. Medhanie 1994:78-92; and International Crisis Group 2005.
8. Miran 2005.
9. Ibid.
10. Menkhaus 2005; and Hussein 2008.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Menkhaus 2004; and Hassan 2009.
14. Möller 2008.
15. Ibrahim nd, p. 116; and Aynte 2010, p. 20, 22.
16. Ibrahim, pp. 116-17.
17. It is reported that those loyal to Sheikh Aweys detest any form of bid'a, or modern innovation. They have stormed wedding parties and mixed-sex gatherings. They consider watching television and playing sports detestable. It was in that context that during the last World Cup cinemas showing football matches were closed down. Some radio stations have also been told not to play foreign music or local love songs (Abubakar 2006).
18. The 7 June 2006 New York Times reported that US government officials have privately acknowledged that the CIA, via its station in Nairobi had channelled hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past year to the ARPCT warlords so they could purchase arms on the international black market.

with the support and approval of the US administration, Ethiopia mounted an invasion of Somalia in December 2006 and routed the ICU within weeks.

Al-Shabab

Reports suggest that Al-Shabab originated around 2004 as an association of young Mujahideen within the ICU, and served as the latter's police and militia. Al-Shabab established itself from the remnants of the ICU following its defeat, and fought the Ethiopian forces, forcing them to withdraw from Mogadishu in December 2008.[19] Al-Shabab is led by Muktar Ali Robow, also known as Abu Mansoor, previously the ICU's deputy defence minister. Another notorious Al-Shabab military commander, Adan Hashi Ayro, was allegedly trained in Afghanistan and built up the group along the lines of the Taliban. This also explains why Al-Shabab is claimed to have links with al-Qaeda and is on the US list of terrorist organisations.

The connections between the ICU and Al-Shabab can be understood by examining the origins of its leadership. Al-Shabab's first leader, Aden Hashi Frarah, "Ayro", was appointed by Hassan Dahir Aweys, one of the ICU's founders.[20] Al-Shabab represents a more militant variant of the ICU and is a Jihadist group seeking to create a Somali Islamic state and wage Jihad against Westerners and the enemies of Islam, as well imposing a puritan form of sharia across Somalia. With about 3,000 to 7,000 battle-hardened fighters, Al-Shabab has gained control of major parts of Mogadishu's neighbourhoods and has set up military bases in large parts of southern Somalia.[21]

Transnational Jihadists and Interstate conflicts in the HOA

Since its ascent to state power in 1989, the NIF in Sudan, driven by Islamic ideology and an Islamic civilization project[22] has pursued expansionist Islamic policies and practices.[23] This policy underpinned the gathering of various Jihadist movements in the NIF-led Sudan. The NIF orchestrated the concentration of transnational Jihadist movements in Sudan. This inevitably contributed to inter-state conflicts in the HOA, because these Jihadist movements began to export their brand of Islamic revolution to neighbouring countries.

Relations between Eritrea and Sudan have been difficult from the very outset of Eritrea's independence due to NIF's support for Eritrean Jihadists such as EIJM led by Khalil Muhammad Amer and his deputy Abu al-Bara' Hasan Salman, both known of their radical Jihadist ideas and alleged relations with Al-Qaeda.

The presence of radical Islamist groups that challenged governments culminated in Eritrea's joining the frontline state coalition (Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda) against Sudan.[24] Eritrea openly supported the Sudanese opposi-

tion. This led to tit-for-tat actions between Eritrea and Sudan. The NIF gave safe haven and support to Islamist organisations from Eritrea in retaliation for the Eritrean government's support for and hosting of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).[25] Ethiopia also joined the frontline coalition against Sudan because the NIF supported Ethiopian opposition groups, such as the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). NIF's support to Al-Ittihad (Somali Jihadist) also gave rise to interstate tension between Sudan and Ethiopia.

The failure to implement the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) verdict and the resulting situation of no-war no-peace has helped to drive Eritrea and Ethiopia into shifting their battleground to Somalia. They have ended up supporting different opposing factions in Somalia. While Ethiopia supported the warlords, Eritrea supported the ICU. The tension between Ethiopia and Eritrea was further heightened by the formation of the Islamist-led opposition Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) in Eritrea. The US is also concerned that Eritrea may be harbouring terrorist groups detrimental to regional and US interests.

Conclusion

The available evidence suggests that Jihadist organisations in the HOA are part of a global web of like-minded organisations supported by states, non-state actors and individuals operating at various levels – local, national, regional and global. These Jihadist movements could easily create havoc in interstate relations and undermine security in the HOA, hence the need to address these challenges at all levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The role of Islam in the HOA's polities and societies should not be exaggerated, underestimated, or treated as insignificant. There is a need to foster and even support democratic forces and moderate Islamist groups (Eritrean Islamic Salvation Movement, Eritrean Islamic Party for Justice and Development, and the Ogaden Islamic Front and other similar groups in the HOA that are more capable than any non-Islamic foreign force in confronting radical Jihadist groups. The moderate states of the Islamic World should be supported as they assume a leading role in the war against terrorism within their own societies and also in the HOA.

2. Creating a HOA anti-terrorism alliance would yield better results than using some countries in the region as part of foreign (or Western) containment policies against other countries (e.g., Ethiopia against Somalia or Sudan or Djibouti against Eritrea). Combating militant transnational Islamist Jihadist organisations requires regional cooperation and not the compartmentalisation of the HOA into zones of peace and zones of war.

19. Aynte 2010, p. 25.
20. International Crisis Group 2005; and Hassan 2009.
21. Ibid.
22. Ahmed 2008, p. 10.
23. Mukhtar 2010, p. 187.
24. Young 2007, p. 29.

25. Woodward 2007, p. 24-5.

3. Disengagement from collapsed or failing states (beyond humanitarian intervention) shuts off avenues for sustainable conflict-resolution and security. It is only through honest commitment and effort, involving all major stakeholders both internal and external, that workable solutions can be found.

4. There is a need to engage in massive, targeted poverty reduction programmes. In particular, the youth should be economically empowered, because they make up the bulk of the fighting forces the terrorists organisations depend on in their war efforts. The attraction of joining Jihadist groups will be greatly reduced if local empowerment and poverty reduction programmes are implemented, including transboundary programmes, where feasible.

5. The international community should not give up on Somalia, which is a state in desperate need of reconstruction, if possible by placing it under reinvigorated United Nations trusteeship. The alternative is to abandon Somalia to its current state of anarchy and to see it becoming the training hub for radical Jihadists, a situation further complicated by the rampant piracy in the waters off the Horn and the existence of other forms of transnational crime.

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