



Executive summary

After the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops in January 2009 and the almost inevitable total collapse of the so-called Transitional Federal Government, Somalia will once again be stateless, but probably in a much worse shape than if nobody had tried to construct a state in the first place. In the brief, the confrontation between the impotent government and its opponents is analyzed, as are the roles of Ethiopia and other external actors, followed by a prediction of the future which may well be much less bleak than is often assumed.

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Somalia after the Ethiopian withdrawal

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SOMALIA AFTER THE ETHIOPIAN WITHDRAWAL

The turn of the year 2008/09 represented a significant juncture for Somalia, featuring both the resignation of the President of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Abdallahi Yusuf, and the withdrawal of the around 3000 Ethiopian armed forces which had been deployed since the invasion in December 2006. The future of Somalia by early January 2009 thus seemed both bleak and unpredictable. In the following, some predictions will nevertheless be offered, based upon an analysis of the recent past and present trends – for which the reader is referred to a companion DIIS report by the same author.¹

WHAT IS OR WAS THE TFG?

The TFG was an element in the Transitional Federal Institutions established in 2004 as a product of the so-called “Eldoret Process,” where (largely self-appointed) representatives of Somalia’s various clans met for a series of negotiations on how to create a state – or rather, how to transform the ineffective Transitional National Government, established in 2001, into a functioning one.

Ever since the fall of the Siyad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia had been stateless – In fact, a textbook example of a “failed state”. More than a dozen attempts have been made to recreate a functioning state, usually with some foreign involvement, if only in the role of “honest brokers.” All of them, including that of establishing the TNG, have failed miserably – and the same will turn out to be the case for the TFG. A parliament (TFP: Transitional Federal Parliament) was appointed by the self-appointed participants in the Eldoret Process according to clan-based quotas; a president was appointed, the choice of a former warlord and ex-president of the semi-

autonomous region of Puntland, Abdullahi Yusuf, being heavily influenced by neighboring Ethiopia; and he in turn appointed a prime minister (Mohamed Gedi), who was resented by just about everybody else and eventually also by the president himself. Quite a few of the clans’ representatives who initially attended the TFI have since left, partly in protest against the president, who is widely regarded as a subservient puppet of the Somali arch-enemy, Ethiopia.

Besides these democratic flaws, the main problem with the TFG has been its inability to govern anything, being so weak that it did not even try. Indeed, it could not even relocate to Somalia because of the security situation. Only in the spring of 2006 did the TFG leave its offices in Kenya and set up shop in Somalia – albeit not in the capital, Mogadishu, but in the provincial town of Baidoa – and only thanks to the protection of Ethiopian troops, whose presence the TFG vehemently denied and whose deployment constituted a violation of the UN embargo on Somalia which has been in force since 1992.

WHO ARE THE “ISLAMISTS”?

Besides the clans who felt sidelined in the TFI – especially the Haweye clans, who have controlled Mogadishu since the civil war (1991-95) – the main adversaries of the TFI have been what are sometimes, though rather misleadingly, lumped together as “the Islamists.” This is, in fact, quite a heterogeneous category, ranging from religiously moderate to radical elements, and from apolitical groups and institutions via political ones to militant ones.

The group includes the various *shari’a* courts across the country – often with their own court militias attached as quasi-police forces – most of which began as local law-and-order institutions in a situation with no other law-enforcement authorities. Most of them have been quite moderate and, at most, Islamic rather than Islamist, and they have usually combined rather liberal versions of *shari’a* with customary law. Then there are

¹ The full version is available at www.diis.dk/graphics/_Staff/bmo/Pdf/Somalia.pdf.

various genuinely Islamist groups with the ambition to establish an Islamic state, maybe even a veritable theocracy. Some of these are related to the international Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan*), most prominent among which is *al-Ittihad al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Union, often referred to as “AIAP”), which has even been accused of links to *al-Qaeda*. It played a certain role during the civil war, but was then defeated, upon which it largely abandoned its former militancy except for a couple of terrorist attacks in Ethiopia in the mid-nineties. Other groups are Islamist, but have never been militant.

Then there are various Islamist militias, among which *al-Shabaab* (“the Youth”), which used to be numerically quite insignificant – albeit no less brutal for that – but which has grown dramatically since the Ethiopian invasion, skillfully framing its struggle for the establishment of a theocracy as a struggle against Ethiopian imperialism by proclaiming *jihad* against the (Christian) invaders. Finally, there are a number of Islamic charities, most of which are entirely comparable to western humanitarian agencies – healing the sick, feeding the hungry and educating the illiterates without any hidden religio-political agenda. There are, however, also some that are funded by Saudi Arabia and other fundamentalist regimes and devoted to the spread of *Wahhabism*. Even fewer may be “jihadist” in the sense of seeking to recruit or fund terrorists.

These various groups only came together in the spring of 2006 in response to a US attempt to force a counter-terrorist alliance of Mogadishu warlords (the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counterterrorism, ARPCT), and they formed what is usually known as the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). The UIC swiftly defeated the ARPCT and took control of the country by June 2006, only to be routed by the Ethiopian intervention in December. Since that time, parts of the former UIC, now under the name ARS (Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia), have been involved in various negotiations with the TFG, whereas others have waged an armed

struggle, combining guerrilla warfare with terrorism – and apparently winning.

WHY DID ETHIOPIA INVADE?

Ethiopia has always been concerned about what happens across the border in Somalia, if only because it is home to a sizable group of ethnic Somalis who have historically struggled against what they see as an illegitimate Ethiopian occupation and who have traditionally been supported by Somalia – leading to a very destructive war in 1977-78. Ethiopia became even more concerned when it saw a leading member of the AIAI, Sheikh Aways, rise to prominence in the UIC after its victory, and when the UIC began aligning itself with both internal and external enemies of the government in Addis Ababa. Among the former, the most disturbing was probably the support given by the UIC to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Among the latter, the support given to the UIC by Eritrea was particularly worrying, as this resembled a proxy war in continuation of the war which Eritrea launched against Ethiopia in 1998 and subsequently lost.

Hence, Ethiopia was predisposed to see the UIC as a threat, and the UIC certainly did not go out of its way to allay the Ethiopian concerns. Addis Ababa responded accordingly: with growing military support for the besieged and impotent TFG, culminating in a full-fledged invasion in December 2006. Well aware of the inherent illegitimacy in this, being the historical arch-enemy of Somalia, the government of Meles Zenawi undoubtedly hoped for a swift and decisive victory that would allow it to withdraw, its forces being replaced by an African Union or United Nations peacekeeping mission. These optimistic hopes were soon proven completely wrong, as the Somali resistance against the Ethiopian occupation – now usually dubbed an “insurgency” – continued, forcing Ethiopia to wage a very dirty counter-insurgency campaign, yet to no avail. Instead of quelling the resistance by the indiscriminate shelling of residential areas and other war

crimes, the Ethiopians found that the resistance gained strength. There being absolutely no “light at the end of the tunnel”, eventually, in the autumn of 2008, they decided to withdraw by the end of the year.

WHERE IS THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY?

The UN has been involved in Somali internal affairs ever since the ill-fated peace-keeping mission from 1992 to 1995, but mainly in the form of humanitarian assistance, for which there has all along been a need, which has increased dramatically in the last two years. The World Food Programme (WFP) has thus been a central actor, largely preventing widespread starvation.

While the Security Council has upheld the arms embargo against Somalia ever since 1992 (with some rather minor amendments) and has passed numerous resolutions about Somali affairs, it has not done anything more substantial since 1995, except as far as the piracy problem has been concerned, which will be dealt with in another DIIS Brief. The Secretary-General – partly acting through a Special Representative – has played a certain role as a broker, e.g. urging an expansion of the TFG with moderate members of ARS. This diplomatic role has, however, been severely hampered by a skewed perspective stemming from the formal recognition of the TFG as the legitimate government of Somalia, rather than, more realistically, as merely one among several competing factions. Acknowledging the need for a peacekeeping mission, the UN has also been unable to deploy one, both because there has been no peace to keep, and due to a shortage of member states volunteering to provide troops.

Both the African Union (AU) and the sub-regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have continued to provide political and military support for the moribund TFG. The latter’s support has been exclusively political, supporting the TFG so unswervingly that Eritrea decided to withdraw from the or-

ganization. The AU’s political position has been the same, but it has also fielded a “peacekeeping” mission, AMISOM, consisting only of Ugandan and Burundi forces, which, falling far short of the requisite troop strength, has accomplished absolutely nothing apart from serving as bodyguards for TFG politicians. In fact, the main success criterion for the AMISOM troops seems to have gradually become not getting themselves killed.

In the absence of strong multilateral actors, the main actors have been foreign powers such as the United States. Unfortunately, its impact has been almost exclusively counter-productive – both for the Americans themselves and, even more so, for the Somali population – and its motives are now (as opposed to the US intervention in the early nineties) predominantly selfish. Based on the erroneous belief that a failed state such as Somalia would be an obvious refuge for terrorists – Including the suspected perpetrators of the 1998 attacks against the US embassies in Nairobi and Daar es-Salaam – the USA has sought to buy local allies, as when they instigated the aforementioned ARPCT, only to provoke the unification of the Islamic courts and the formation of the UIC. Since the Ethiopian invasion, to which Washington undoubtedly gave its prior approval, US armed forces have launched several air strikes against Somali targets, killing numerous civilians and thus undermining their own legitimacy.

Besides the multinational and state actors, various humanitarian agencies – Western NGOs, UN affiliates and Islamic charities – have done their best to feed the malnourished Somali civilian population, but the prevailing insecurity, including piracy, has made this task almost impossible. Another non-state actor which seems to have been at least as successful has been *al-Qaeda*, which has proclaimed Somalia a new battlefield in its global *jihad* against the infidels. To what extent *al-Qaeda* operatives are actually present in Somalia, however, is not clear, and experience from the early nineties, when the network first attempted to establish a presence here, provides some consolation. A country such as Somalia was

not then, and probably still is not, a very hospitable environment for international “jihadists.”

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

The most likely outcome of the present debacle is that (what little is left of) the TFI will leave Somalia, either back to Kenya or to Ethiopia, and be allowed to continue to (pretend to) govern. It is unlikely that the TFI will be “de-recognised” by the international community, and even conceivable that it may be allowed to extend its term of office, which expires in 2009, mainly because the international community needs at least a quasi-state to “rubber-stamp” requests for entry into Somali territory and territorial waters in pursuit of pirates. While it may thus continue a “virtual existence” on artificial life support, it is almost completely inconceivable that it can retain any actual control over Somalia. It is, on the other hand, quite likely that the former president may again establish some control over Puntland, perhaps even going all the way and proclaiming independence as did Somaliland in 1991 – a status which it has maintained ever since, albeit without formal international recognition.

The rest of the country is almost bound to fall to the “Islamists,” who are now (as opposed to prior to the invasion) dominated by extremist and militant groups like *al-Shabaab*. They will probably be able to establish quite firm control, thereby improving the security situation for the population, as the UIC did in the latter half of 2006. This alone will gain them considerable legitimacy in the eyes of the population, especially if they are wise enough to show moderation. On the other hand, they are bound to forfeit this legitimacy if they proceed to seek to transform Somalia into a Salafist Islamic state, for which the (Sufi-oriented) Somali Muslims are almost certainly not prepared – In which case the religious extremists will need to institute a Taliban-like dictatorship. If the former happens – and if external actors prudently refrain from interfering – It also seems likely that Somali society will be able to develop a reasonably peaceful, albeit stateless modicum of order, based on informal arrangements involving traditional institutions, as was the case for about a decade from around 1995 to 2005.

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