

COMMENTARY

On the Somalia Dilemma: Adding Layers of Complexity to an Already Complex Emergency

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If there were any doubt that the current humanitarian crisis in southern Somalia is more the result of fierce political struggles than the reoccurrence of drought, the events of the past eight months would clearly confirm this. The justification and wisdom of Kenya's recent invasion of Somalia (October 2011) to protect its northeastern border with Somalia and its important coastal tourist industry can be widely debated. What is less arguable is that the military incursion is not an isolated issue, but rather is connected to a process in southern Somalia that began in the 1990s and took a turn for the worse in 2006. It was in early 2006 that the U.S. government put its support behind a weak and very unpopular alliance of warlords, called the Alliance Against Terrorism and the Restoration of Peace (AATRP), to capture or eliminate individuals in Somalia responsible for the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and to stem the influence of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). At the time the radical Islamic element of the UIC was relatively minor, and in fact one of its keys leaders, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, is the current president of the Western-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Somalia.

Not surprisingly, the AATRP was badly routed within a few months by an increasingly popular UIC, and its radical elements and their political control were strengthened greatly, both numerically and geographically, by this victory. As one Somali colleague noted to me during a conversation in Nairobi around that time, "it is as if the U.S. scored a goal for the opposing team" (interview, June 16, 2006). In short, the outside support provided to a group of very unpopular "thugs" and their armed followers under the rubric of an alliance to fight terrorism only insured the victory

of the UIC's radical elements and their increased popularity and power in southern Somalia. The youthful al-Shabaab Islamic group, with its ties to global jihadist groups and the al Qaeda network, grew in power due to its successes in defeating the "foreign-backed" AATRP. As Roland Marchal indicates, "Al-Shabaab's new strength was demonstrated by the number of seats it held in institutions created by the victorious ICU in June and July 2006" (2009:390). With the invasion of Ethiopian forces later that year and their occupation of Mogadishu until January 2009, the radicalization of Islamic politics and the strength of al-Shabaab, which by then had captured the strategic port of Kismayo, grew to the point that it occupied and administered most of southern Somalia right up to the border of Kenya.

The invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia, a neighboring state with a long history of strained relations with Somalia and Somalis, served to further fuel local resentment against outsiders and support for a well-armed group like al-Shabaab, which had the capacity and external connections to stand up to outside (foreign) forces. Ethiopia's departure from Somalia, and the handing over of security responsibility for Mogadishu and the fledgling TFG to a small contingent of African Union (A.U.) forces made up of Ugandans and Burundians, only multiplied local perceptions that foreign occupiers were the main allies of the TFG.¹ A religious layer added to the complexity of the situation, since the occupying forces, now including Kenya, could be portrayed by al-Shabaab as Christian crusaders and "infidels" who wanted to defame Islam and its followers.

Fast forward now to the failure of the short rainy season (*deyr*) of October–November 2010 and the disappointing long rains (*gu*) of March–May 2011, coupled with increased conflict between the al-Shabaab and TFG and A.U. forces, and the conditions for a humanitarian crisis were manifest. However, the current humanitarian crisis really began with the prolonged fighting (2007–8) in Mogadishu during the Ethiopian occupation and the displacement of more than six hundred thousand Somalis from the area. Settled farmers and agropastoralists in the Jubba and Shebelle Valleys and Bay region of southern Somalia also were affected by these and subsequent armed conflicts, and many abandoned their farms and/or saw their livestock perish due to lack of grazing opportunities or confiscation by competing militia groups. By 2010 al-Shabaab faced other opposition in southern Somalia, especially from another Islamist group (Hizbul Islaam) that was unhappy with al-Shabaab's strict interpretation of Islam, harsh judicial methods, and strong disregard for local leadership and clan structures (see Marcal 2009). Al-Shabaab also had its own internal divisions, with an important element that was more flexible and less devoted to military solutions than the hardliners. As the drought worsened, the followers of Hizbul Islaam and al-Shabaab had several armed skirmishes in southern Somalia that further disrupted local livelihoods, including those of pastoralists, interfered with trade routes, and accelerated the exodus of Somalis into neighboring Kenya. By October 2011 more than four hundred thousand

Somali refugees were crowded in and around Dadaab refugee camp, making it the largest refugee settlement in the world. Dadaab itself was originally planned with infrastructure and facilities for a human population of about 25 percent of that size.

The Somali kidnappings in Kenya of a French tourist, who eventually died in captivity near Afmadow, Somalia, and two Spanish Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) workers at Dadaab, and the killing of the kidnapped French tourist's husband, pushed the Somalia famine off the headlines of most international media outlets and replaced it with concerns about regional security and war. Nonetheless, as of January 2012 the food and health situations in Somalia not only remain desperate despite the onset of heavy rains in November–December 2011, but the refugee crisis has worsened, according to the UNHCR (2011). The retaliatory invasion of southern Somalia by the Kenyan army on October 4, with accusations that the army is receiving logistical and other support from the U.S. and French governments, further complicates what is already an incredibly complex political and humanitarian crisis. The incursion also adds a dangerous regional element to the Somalia predicament, as well as reminding one of the fierce power struggles that undergird the current crisis, which has cost more than eighty thousand lives so far, with thousands of additional deaths possible in 2012 unless food and medical deliveries are sustained (FSNAU-Somalia 2011).² Already the Kenyan army is requesting the financial and military support of the international community if it is to take over and hold the port city of Kismayo. To quote Yusuf Haji, the Kenyan minister of defense: "The Kismayu question is for the international community to decide. Kenya was not going to fix the entire Somalia problem since it has been a failed state for 20 years" (quoted in Kimani & Oluoch 2012). As of January 2012, it remains unclear if the international community, including the U.S. and E.U. countries, is willing to make the kinds of commitments that Kenya is requesting.

Unfortunately, the urgency of the humanitarian situation is such that by the time this commentary is published, the fate of thousands of food-insecure Somalis will already have been determined, and probably without much progress toward a political settlement (see FSNAU-Somalia 2011; Jowell 2012). Despite the fact that Kenya probably is justified in protecting its borders, citizens, and economic interests through its recent actions, one hopes that, counter to the opinion of some political experts (e.g., Jowell 2012), the military advance in southern Somalia will be brief and limited to protecting borders and interests rather than involving an occupation of Somali territory on a sustained basis. Regardless of the timing, a few words are necessary about what can be done to stave off further (and future) deaths in Somalia of children, women, and the elderly, who are victims, not perpetrators, of the current predicament.

There is not sufficient space here to address the question of an international solution to Somalia, but it unquestionably will require, first, a strong

diplomatic strategy that involves more than Kenyan representatives around the table. Since the Somali state's collapse in 1991, military offensives by foreign troops, including U.S., U.N., and Ethiopian forces, have been perceived locally as invasions by occupying forces, with disastrous results. Recall the infamous and tragic "Black Hawk Down" incident in 1993 with the violent polarization of Somalis against U.S. and U.N. troops, as well as the recent rallying by Somalis against the Ethiopian occupation and the growth in the number of al-Shabaab supporters that followed. There is every indication that a prolonged invasion by the Kenyan army would have similar results in terms of the strengthening and popularity of radical groups intent on armed conflict and terrorism.

Second, an immediate effort to deal with the humanitarian crisis requires a dialogue among all political actors in the current conflict, regardless of the vast differences in their ideologies and strategic interests. This means working with the leaders of groups who occupy territories where food shortages and human suffering are severe, including the al-Shabaab. Currently food aid from Western agencies cannot be delivered to al-Shabaab areas because of (1) constraints by al-Shabaab on food and medical aid distribution, and (2) U.S. laws against collaboration between U.S.-funded NGOs and recognized terrorist groups, such as al-Shabaab, even when it is limited to humanitarian assistance. These prohibitions aggravate a growing human catastrophe. In the spirit of saving lives, a compromise needs to be made to insure that relief supplies reach the critically vulnerable, even if it is counter to U.S. policies in the region. That act alone might do more to win the good-will ("hearts and minds") of Somali residents than almost any other action, as well as possibly saving the lives of more than two hundred thousand food-insecure people.

Finally, the Kenyan invasion of southern Somalia merely adds another layer of complexity to a wretchedly intricate and seemingly intractable crisis. It also reminds us that outside interventions have not worked in Somalia, nor are they likely to work in the future, especially a prolonged invasion by a neighboring country. If famines are "man made" rather than natural events, as I have argued elsewhere (Little 2003, 2008), then avoiding a worst-case scenario has to be the immediate priority. This course of action will require some kind of political compromise, but in contrast to the grand state-building efforts that have marked the failed and expensive efforts of the past ten years, including the current TFG experiment, small local-level initiatives should be acknowledged and supported. There have been almost one hundred such grassroots peace efforts in the past few years, with settlements as minor as agreements between competing factions to keep a vital trade route or a grazing area open to various pastoralists (see Brickhall 2011). For the current humanitarian crisis this would mean, for example, allowing Somali NGOs and communities to negotiate with the relevant parties, which could be al-Shabaab, about the delivery of needed food and medical supplies to affected communities. Only if all other efforts fail to

insure deliveries to dying populations should military options be considered—and these should be ended immediately when conditions improve.

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Notes

1. During the past few months, Ethiopian troops have reentered central Somalia to support African Union (A.U.) forces near the Ethiopian border (see Jowell 2012).
2. Despite recent improvements in food security in central and southern Somalia, a December report of the FSNAU-Somalia notes that "an estimated 3 million people remain in crisis in the South. Nearly 250,000 people continue facing imminent starvation in parts of the Middle Shabelle region as well as Mogadishu and the Afgoye corridor" (2011:5).