

SOMALIA: RISE AND FALL OF AN ISLAMIST REGIME

Robert Spencer

Late in 2003, a Somali journalist named Bashir Goth wrote in the *Addis Tribune* about a group of Islamic clerics known as the “Authority for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.” This group, Goth complained, was “trying to impose draconian moral codes on Somaliland citizens.” He concluded: “It is time we have to speak out. If we don’t do it today, we won’t be able to do it tomorrow. Because there will be no tomorrow as our country descends into 7th century Arabia.”¹

That descent, when it came, was swift. Criticizing the warlords on Islamic grounds, and declaring Somalia’s traditional Islamic culture to be not sufficiently Islamic, a *jihadist* group affiliated with al-Qaeda, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), began to make major advances in late 2005 and early 2006, particularly in southern Somalia and the Mogadishu area. “The existing government is not an Islamic one,” explained Islamic Courts Union leader Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys in October 2005, “and we will be having our own Islamic faith and we will be very strong in influencing our people.”² Later, while the ICU was in power in Mogadishu, the group’s first vice chairperson, Ar-Rahman Mohomood Jinikow, declared: “We will only approve a constitution based on theology, because an Islamic constitution is the only one that serves all of us justly.... Secular constitution, whether it is democratic or any other, is never fair and right, and Muslims have only one constitution which is entirely based on Allah’s Qur’an that will avail all Muslims in the world now and the Hereafter.”³



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In April 2006, the Islamic Courts declared *jihad* against the country's warlords. At a Mogadishu rally, Sheikh Nur Ollow of the Courts declared that the warlords were "unholy elements" who were "serving the interests of non-Somalis who could not care less about our well-being, culture and religion"—a clear reference to the United States, which had noted the group's connections with al-Qaeda early on. "It is time to help those who want peace and harmony among Somalis and the teachings of the commands of Allah and the words of the Prophet," continued Ollow. "We will not be governed by a few warlords financed by the enemy of Islam."

Another Islamic Courts Union leader, Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim Sulley, maintained at the same rally that fighting the warlords was a holy duty for Muslims: "As it says in the Qur'an, the fight against those who are promoting hostility and fighting against Islam is a holy war. Any war against the warlords is a holy war and a sacrifice in the name of Allah."⁴

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The descent

In early 2006, the battle was joined in earnest, and by mid-2006, the Islamists had taken full control of Mogadishu. In subsequent months, they conquered most of the remaining pockets of organized resistance to their rule in the southern portion of the country. ICU forces seized the port city of Kismayo in late Sep-

tember, firing on demonstrators who turned out to rally against their regime.⁵ In late November, the President of the northern region of Puntland announced that he too would henceforth rule according to Islamic law.⁶ Aweys, who became the group's leader around the same time it began to gain significant power in Somalia, struck an explicitly anti-American posture and spoke of the Islamic Courts' effort to take control of Somalia as part of the global *jihad*, vowing to fight America and its allies "everywhere, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan."⁷

This was the Islamic Courts' consistent stance; in August 2006, at the height of the Israeli incursion into Lebanon, the Islamists organized a pro-Hezbollah rally in Mogadishu, which was attended by over two thousand people who chanted "Down with the enemies of Islam, wherever they are!"⁸ More ominously, shortly thereafter the ICU opened a training camp north of Mogadishu for *jihadists*, featuring trainers from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Aweys told the trainees: "You will study military tactics, because you will defend your country with Islamic morality."⁹

For its troubles, the regime received an endorsement from none other than Osama bin Laden. In a message circulated on the Internet in late June, bin Laden exhorted Somalis: "You have no other means for salvation unless you commit to Islam, put your hands in the hands of the Islamic Courts to build an Islamic state in Somalia."¹⁰ Meanwhile, foreign Islamists were hastening to aid the new regime in Somalia. The United Nations Security Council reported in November 2006 that the Islamic Republic of Iran was supplying weapons to the ICU in an attempt to obtain uranium in return.¹¹

Meanwhile, the ICU appeared to bear out Bashir Goth's fears. The Courts forbade music (which is prohibited according to strict Islamic law), dancing and soccer within days of taking power.¹² Women began to don Saudi dress, which covered their faces, rather than traditional Somali garb, which did not. And ICU militiamen proved ready to enforce Islamic law with an iron fist: after banning all movies and television viewing, *jihadists* shot and killed two people who were watching a World Cup soccer match in early July.¹³

That September, Mogadishu youth gave a hint that the new Islamic regime was not popular with all Somalis. They responded to an ICU attempt to break up their viewing of another soccer match by burning tires and throwing stones at ICU militiamen.¹⁴ But the implementation of the strictest *sharia* provisions remained high on the ICU's list of priorities both before and after this show of resistance. Raids in Mogadishu led to 60 arrests for the crime of movie-watching.¹⁵ Women were forbidden to swim at Mogadishu's Leedo beach.¹⁶

The ICU also moved to muzzle the press, imposing 13 "rules of conduct" on journalists. These included a prohibition on the publication or dissemination of "information contrary to the Muslim religion, the public interest or the interest of the nation," as well as "information likely to create conflicts between the population and the Council of Islamic Courts." Journalists were required to reveal their sources, "must not serve foreign interests," and "must not publish or disseminate elements of a foreign culture contrary to Islamic culture or promoting bad behavior, such as nudity on film." Finally, "the media must not employ the terms which infidels

use to refer to Muslims such as 'terrorists,' 'extremists,' etc."¹⁷

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Conflict is joined

The hostile takeover transformed Somalia's foreign policy. The ICU became a voice in the international *jihadist* movement, joining those who called for the murder of Pope Benedict XVI after his remarks in Regensburg, Germany, in August 2006 were widely interpreted as an insult to the Islamic prophet Muhammad.

Tensions with Ethiopia, meanwhile, increased almost immediately after the ICU took power. The group's leader Sharif Sheikh Ahmed declared on July 2nd that "Ethiopians have been illegally crossing our border since earlier last month and now they are in some parts of our territory but, God willing, they will regret it." Calling Ethiopia "the enemy number one of the Somali people," he urged Somalis to fight back.¹⁸ Ethiopia initially denied sending troops, but Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi stressed the new Somali government's ties to the al-Qaeda-linked *jihadist* group Al-Itihad.¹⁹ And by the end of July, Ethiopian troops were entering Somalia in significant numbers, with the Islamic Courts Union regime renewing calls for *jihad* in response.

The ICU responded with more threats. "We call on Ethiopia to withdraw its forces from Somalia, otherwise be ready for full-scale war," Aweys said in late August. "We say again that Ethiopian intervention in Somalia will never be accepted; no

one can dare divert us onto a path other than Sharia law.”²⁰ The ICU also threatened the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which in late 2006 endorsed a plan to send Sudanese and Ugandan peace-keeping forces to the Somali border. The ICU’s education minister, Fuad Mohammed Kalaf, stated that “our policy is to fight against countries in IGAD who are our foes,” as he announced the opening of *jihad* warfare training camps.²¹

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Finally, on October 9, 2006, the ICU regime formally declared *jihad* against Ethiopia.²² In doing so, Sheikh Ahmed asked for help from Somali expatriates: “I am appealing to all Somali communities... abroad to take part in the Jihad operation against the Ethiopian troops who want to occupy our land.”²³ This call did not go unheeded: Somalis from as far away as Canada returned home, and after the ICU regime collapsed American, British, and Australian passports were found on the bodies of slain warriors.²⁴

Just three weeks later, the ICU announced that it had accumulated 3,000 recruits. Sheikh Abdinur Farah, an ICU commander at a *jihadist* recruitment post south of Mogadi-

shu, stated: “We have trained them to fight and that is a religious obligation. Ethiopia has made clear its intention: that is a war against us. So we are calling an open war against Ethiopia and every young fighter is welcome to join the jihad against the Ethiopian invaders.”²⁵

As peace talks broke down between the ICU and the remnants of the UN-recognized government in the northern part of the country, the ICU staged a rally in the southern Somali town of Jilib. While thousands demonstrated, ICU leader Sheikh Mohamed Omar Mursal reiterated that the ICU’s struggle was a religious one: “We saw peace talks in Khartoum derailed by Ethiopia and its puppets. Our people are ready to protect their religion from the enemies of Allah. We are ready to fight you, Ethiopia.”²⁶ Meanwhile, one of Yusuf’s predecessors, Abdiqassim Salat Hassan, who had been the officially recognized President of Somalia from 2000 to 2004, lined up with the Islamic Courts regime, saying that defensive *jihad* against Ethiopian troops was “compulsory” for Somalis.²⁷

On November 27th, as the *jihadist* regime deployed large numbers of troops on the border with Ethiopia, an ICU military commander, Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim Bilal, declared: “War is imminent. There is no other alternative. Ethiopia declared war, so we will defend ourselves and protect our country and people.”²⁸ Two weeks later the ICU delivered an ultimatum. The ICU’s security chief, Yusuf Mohamed Siad, announced: “We are giving a deadline to the invading forces. If Ethiopian forces inside our territory do not withdraw after a week, we will not hesitate to launch full-scale attacks on them. From today on, all Ethiopians must start leaving

Somalia; if they do not they will be responsible for the bloodshed that will follow.”²⁹ On Friday, December 15, ICU officials distributed sermons on *jihād* to mosques in Mogadishu preaching “holy war” against Ethiopian troops inside Somalia.³⁰

Reversal of fortune

As war between Somalia and Ethiopia appeared inevitable, the U.S. State Department weighed in, emphasizing the ICU’s links with al-Qaeda. “The Council of Islamic Courts,” explained Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer, “is now controlled by al Qaeda cell individuals, East Africa al Qaeda cell individuals. The top layer of the court are [sic] extremists. They are terrorists. They are killing nuns, they have killed children and they are calling for a *jihād*.”³¹ Former President Yusuf agreed, and saw wider implications in the ICU’s activity: “Al-Qaeda is opening up shop in Somalia. This is a new chapter and part of the terror group’s plan to wage war against the West.”³²

The fighting broke out on December 21st, with the ICU almost immediately declaring victory. “Our mujahedeen have killed 70 soldiers today... the Islamic courts are winning the war against Ethiopian invasion,” declared Sheikh Sulley on the first day of fighting.³³ When Ethiopia launched large-scale airstrikes against several Somali towns three days later, Sulley was contemptuous: “They are cowards. They are afraid of the face-to-face war and resorted to airstrikes. I hope God will help us shoot down their planes.”³⁴ The next day Sulley was proven wrong about the Ethiopians’ fear of “face-to-face war,” as Ethiopian troops, along with Somalis loyal to the Transitional Government, captured the border town of Belet Weyne.³⁵ Only a day later, the

Ethiopians launched a three-pronged offensive, putting the ICU to a full tactical retreat.

By December 27th, Mogadishu was within reach of the Ethiopian and Transitional Government troops: “Islamic Courts militias are already on the run,” said a spokesman for the anti-*jihād* forces, “and we hope that Mogadishu will fall into our hands without firing a shot.”³⁶ ICU troops fled Mogadishu the next day; Ethiopian and anti-ICU Somali forces were greeted in the capital with cheers and celebrations.³⁷ Kismayo, the last significant ICU stronghold, fell several days later. On January 8th, the U.S. intervened directly, targeting al-Qaeda members in airstrikes against Afmadow and Ras Kamboni in southern Somalia, two of the ICU’s last redoubts.³⁸ Ras Kamboni fell several days later, and the Islamic Courts regime came to a definitive end—although ICU partisans continue sporadic guerrilla attacks to this day.

Lessons left unlearned

The rapid collapse of the regime took many Western observers by surprise. The Western press had been remarkably hospitable to the ICU regime, praising it as the best hope for a recovery of peace and order in that anarchic land, and generally expressing the expectation that it would solidify its hold on power and bring long-lasting stability to Somalia. In June 2006, the BBC opined that the ICU’s coming to power in Mogadishu “may prove... to be a turning point in the peace process.” It warned that the real danger to peace was not the *jihād*ist extremism of the ICU, but the Western characterization of that extremism: if the ICU were “treated with respect—as partners—they could turn into the group which delivers the capital to the government and

so end years of conflict.” If, however, ICU strongholds were “viewed as a hotbed of Islamic extremism, that too, could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”³⁹ Subsequently, in late February 2007, the BBC lamented the end of the ICU regime: “Since the overthrow of the Union of Islamic Courts at the turn of the year, Somalia has been descending back into the violence and chaos seen in the previous 16 years....”⁴⁰

Western analysts who saw in the ICU regime a new hope for the restoration of political order in Somalia were falling into the same mistake as did the 1930s journalists and analysts who praised the Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini regimes for the order they brought to their respective countries.

The *Times of London* went even farther. In his coverage, *Times* reporter Martin Fletcher waxed lyrical about the new, ICU-controlled Mogadishu: “For the first time in a generation Somalis can walk around safely, even at night. Children play football in the streets. Squads of Somalis in fluorescent yellow jackets emblazoned ‘Employment for Peace’ are removing mountains of garbage. Shops are painting brightly coloured pictures of their wares—mobiles, satellite dishes, radios—on their walls. The derelict port has been reopened, though every vessel must be unloaded by hand as there are no cranes, and children point excitedly at the sight of aircraft overhead.” Fletcher quoted a local doctor who had worked in a London hospital: “It’s like paradise compared to even one

year ago. I’m feeling more safe here than in London.”⁴¹

In light of the stories of ICU troops firing into crowds, imposing draconian punishments for offenses such as watching soccer games, and energetically working toward the Talibanization of Somalia, and in light also of the cheering crowds in Mogadishu that greeted the troops who toppled the ICU regime, such accounts have an ironic piquancy. The ICU’s rigidity and harshness, and its rapid fall, makes it extremely unlikely that it could ever have enjoyed significant popular support. This is even more unlikely given the fact that the vision of Islam it was determined to impose upon Somalia was so at variance with the syncretistic cultural Islam that had hitherto prevailed in Somalia. Western analysts who saw in the ICU regime a new hope for the restoration of political order in Somalia were falling into the same mistake as did the 1930s journalists and analysts who praised the Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini regimes for the order they brought to their respective countries. By entering into Somalia so rapidly after the ICU’s seizure of power, the Ethiopian troops may have spared Somalis years of suffering under an extremist, totalitarian, brutal regime.

Somalia still desperately needs a strong government that will finally restore stability to this troubled nation. But the Islamic Courts Union regime only offered Somalis a new hell in place of an old one.



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