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Somalia, Redux *A More Hands-Off Approach*

by David Axe

Executive Summary

The two-decade-old conflict in Somalia has entered a new phase, which presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the United States. The elections of new U.S. and Somali presidents in late 2008 and early 2009 provide an opportunity to reframe U.S.-Somali relations. To best encourage peace in the devastated country, Washington needs a new strategy that takes into account hard-learned lessons from multiple failed U.S. interventions. The old strategy favoring military force and reflexive opposition to all Islamists should give way to one emphasizing regional diplomacy and at least tacit acceptance of a government that is capable of bringing order to Somalia.

Whatever the Obama administration's approach to Somalia, it must avoid the failures of the Bush administration. The rise of a popular, moderate Islamic government in 2006 sparked an Ethiopian invasion, for which the United States provided key backing. Washington defended its support of the Ethiopian attack on the grounds that Somalia's Islamic Courts regime was actively harboring known members of al Qaeda, a claim that appears to have been exaggerated.

The resulting Ethiopian occupation of Somalia—in which as many as 16,000 people died—collapsed in early 2009 against the backdrop of one of the world's worst sustained humanitarian crises. Taking advantage of the political and economic chaos, hundreds of desperate Somali fishermen turned to piracy, making the waters off Somalia the world's most dangerous for seafarers.

With the Islamists' return to power earlier this year, under the banner of the new president, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, Washington has a rare chance to reset bilateral relations. The Obama administration should work to build a regional framework for reconciliation, the rule of law, and economic development that acknowledges the unique risks of intervention in East Africa.

Somalia's best hope for peace is the moderate Islamic government that has emerged from the most recent rounds of fighting, despite early opposition from the United States and its allies. There are ways in which the United States could help Somalia escape its cycle of violence and peacefully encourage progress by working with this former enemy, but Washington should err on the side of nonintervention.

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Introduction

Somalia is the location of one of the world's most deeply rooted and persistent conflicts. Since the 1991 revolt against President Siad Barre's repressive government, the fighting has progressed through three distinct phases, each accompanied by major humanitarian crises. The conflict has shattered the country's political landscape and has resulted in two fully independent northern Somali substates—Somaliland and Puntland—each with its own unique security problems. Meanwhile, greater Somalia has devolved into a shifting patchwork of clan-based enclaves.

The Somali conflict “defies the imagination in terms of its complexity, with clans and subclans that dominate internal politics,” said Theresa Whalen, the U.S. Defense Department's deputy assistant secretary for African affairs in 2007, which was the height of the insurgency against the occupying Ethiopian army. “In some ways,” Whalen added, the conflict has “defied Africa's ability to help Somalis help themselves.”¹

Because of that complexity, Somalia has proved remarkably resistant to foreign intervention. Three U.S.-led interventions since the 1991 civil war have failed to achieve their goals, whether modest or ambitious. Internal initiatives have made some modest progress. Surges of popular Islamism have twice opened the door to a measure of slow national reconciliation but have also alarmed foreign governments—especially Washington.

The first groundswell of Islamism, the rapid spread of the grassroots Islamic Courts Union, incited a major intervention by the United States and Ethiopia. Both nations insisted that Islamic rule would mean the “Talibanization” of Somalia and would create an East African base for al Qaeda operations. In retrospect, it seems that Washington sacrificed an opportunity for peace in Somalia on the altar of the “war on terror.”

The second Islamist surge, beginning in the wake of the Ethiopian withdrawal early this year, saw the Islamic Courts Union return in

all but name. That surge presents another opportunity for peace. The disastrous, U.S.-supported Ethiopian occupation of Somalia, which coincided with the bloodiest years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, forced a quiet but profound shift in Washington's approach to Somalia, which coincided with the beginning of Obama's presidency.

The Bush administration reacted to Somalia's first Islamic surge in 2006 with a mixture of hostility and confrontation: the nascent Obama administration, by contrast, greeted the second Islamic surge of 2009 with guarded optimism. “We're in a very promising moment. It's fragile, but all new beginnings are,” a State Department official said of Somali President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed's moderate Islamic government in January. The official added that the State Department would be carefully watching Ahmed as Obama's senior advisers crafted a new strategy for Somalia.²

The New Somali Regime

In 2009, Ahmed has facilitated reconciliation between some Islamists and the UN- and U.S.-backed Transitional Federal Government, a Western-friendly alliance of outsider clans, resulting in a new “hybrid” government with broader popular support and more fluid factions than before.³ He has also reestablished a federal presence in Mogadishu, Somalia's largest city and traditional capital, for the first time since the 1991 civil war.⁴ Finally, Ahmed has promised to crack down on piracy and reportedly has worked through back channels to deliver ultimatums directly to pirate bosses based in autonomous Puntland and Somaliland.⁵

Ahmed's actions represent an effort to forge a middle ground between his country's many competing factions, the aid groups that feed and care for millions of Somalis, and the world powers with a stake in Somalia's security. To appease some of Somalia's more hard-line Islamists, in February Ahmed even instituted sharia law in

the portions of Somali his government controls. But it was a moderate form of sharia calculated to avoid alienating moderate Somalis and Western powers. Under Ahmed's brand of Islamic law, girls can attend school, and television and music are allowed.⁶

These are all positive steps for Somalia—the most positive in years, or even decades. But the government resurgence has sparked a backlash by the major insurgent groups, particularly the powerful extremist group al Shabab. This armed group was once allied to Ahmed's Islamic Courts Union, but split away as it grew increasingly radical and violent, even proclaiming itself an ally of al Qaeda (although al Shabab apparently remains a strictly internal insurgency with no aspiration to export terrorism).

In May 2009, al Shabab launched an offensive from its bases in southern Somalia with the intention of rolling back the government's recent territorial and organizational gains. The fighting was the worst in months and was the first serious test for Ahmed's administration.⁷ Al Shabab characterized its attack as an attempt to liberate Somalia from an illegitimate “stooge” government, dominated by Western powers.⁸ (The umbrella organization for the most powerful Somali insurgent groups even calls itself the “Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia.”) But Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, the UN envoy to Somalia, denounced the offensive as a “coup attempt.”⁹ After two weeks of fighting, Ahmed's government counterattacked, and succeeded in driving back al Shabab. By June the violence had ebbed but not ended, as al Shabab seemed to redirect its efforts toward Ahmed's allies in central Somalia.¹⁰

One challenge for Washington will be to tailor its support of the Somali government to provide the assistance needed without slipping into old interventionist habits that, in East Africa, especially, have proven to be counterproductive. The Obama administration has several options. It can adopt a largely hands-off approach, reasoning that other global challenges warrant more of its attention, and call

on regional governments to play a larger role. It can back Ahmed's government with financial and diplomatic support, or it can pledge such support in the future provided that Ahmed's government meets certain conditions. The least appealing option would be to continue the failed policy of military intervention that began in the early 1990s and continued through the Bush years.

Nonmilitary support for Ahmed would be a major reversal for the United States, which once unfairly branded the Somali president's Islamic Courts Union as terrorist sympathizers. By allying with Ahmed, the Obama administration would demonstrate that it can accept that a peaceful and prosperous Somalia probably means an Islamic government in Somalia—but not a Somalia that represents a serious terrorism threat. For the United States, learning to live with an Islamic government in Somalia would be a useful precedent for approaching fragile, rising Islamic states across the developing world.

U.S. Interests in Somalia

American interests in Somalia are several. Most immediately, the United States wants a Somalia that does not harbor or produce international terrorists. Similarly, Washington wants a Somalia that no longer functions as a safe haven for pirates. More broadly, Americans hope that Somalia, and all of East Africa, grows economically and better integrates into the global economy. They are wary, however, of government-sponsored aid programs that cost hundreds of millions of dollars but produce very little.

Washington is Somalia's biggest sponsor. Annual State Department aid to Somalia averages around \$100 million.¹¹ The United States also helps pay for UN operations in Somalia, which cost nearly \$500 million annually.¹² Somalis living abroad, including tens of thousands in the United States, send nearly \$1 billion to their homeland every year.¹³ A peaceful and prosperous Somalia would be less of a burden on the developed world, and could

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even become a valuable exporter of certain commodities, particularly tuna.

It's increasingly clear to U.S. policymakers that these three key goals—preventing terrorism, preventing piracy, and integrating Somalia into the world economy—are related. “There needs to be a stronger and more sustained diplomatic push to engage with a wide range of actors within Somalia and stakeholders in the wider region—both in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East—if we are going to address the underlying problems that have contributed to piracy and rising extremism,” Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI) said.¹⁴

To the extent that religious extremism and piracy have arisen in the absence of governmental authority, a stable, self-sufficient Somalia would be a salve to both problems. “Our longer-term strategy is to help rebuild the Somali state,” a State Department source said. “If you want to help ensure regional stability and prevent the criminality that has taken place around Somalia for the last decade and a half, you must have a state capable of securing its borders. That’s our overriding perspective.”¹⁵

A stable Somali state might be the best long-term solution, but the United States has focused on temporarily mitigating the near-term problems of extremism and piracy at the expense of that desired long-term end state. Military action, especially U.S. support during the 2006 Ethiopian invasion that targeted the Islamic Courts Union regime, has undermined prospects for a prosperous, stable Somalia. The United States has also employed military force in targeted counter-piracy operations, such as the deployment of U.S. naval forces to Somali waters, and President Obama’s authorization for Special Forces to use deadly force against three pirates holding American ship captain Richard Phillips hostage in April 2009.¹⁶

Using military force to address the problems of terrorism and piracy might be effective in the short-term, but it doesn’t address Somalia’s long-term problems. Meanwhile, it can, and often has, exacerbated them. In particular, the U.S.-Ethiopian invasion stoked

anti-Western sentiment in Somalia and empowered al Shabab. The resulting occupation worsened Somalia’s 20-year-old refugee and food crises and reversed what little economic development had occurred during the Islamic Court Unions’ brief rule. If future U.S. military action in Somalia undermines stability in the country, as it has in the past, then overall U.S. strategy for Somalia will be both incoherent and self-defeating. Accordingly, a wise strategy should not rely on military intervention.

A History of Intervention

For more than five years following the disastrous U.S.-led, UN peacekeeping deployment during 1991–1995, there was no clear U.S. policy for Somalia, except to fund UN humanitarian operations and hope for the best. It wasn’t until after 9/11, in response to a perceived threat from Somalia-based al Qaeda operatives, that Washington took a more proactive stance. Again, the military played a lead role, despite the futility of past interventions.¹⁷ Under Bush, the Pentagon was given a broad mandate to operate anywhere it perceived there was a terrorist threat, or even the possibility of an eventual terrorist threat. To the Pentagon, Somalia had every hallmark of an emerging terror haven—remoteness, lawlessness, and a groundswell of popular Islamism—which justified the use of military force under the post-9/11 “Global War on Terror” construct. U.S. military missions in and around Somalia included the 2002 establishment of the Pentagon’s permanent East African base in Djibouti, on Somalia’s northern border, as well as U.S. support for the Ethiopian invasion.¹⁸ The results, more than seven years on, have been disastrous. Somalia is less stable and is a greater threat to American interests than it was *before* the most recent round of U.S. intervention.

Somalia’s 20-year internal conflict has progressed through three phases. For each phase, there has been a corresponding American military intervention, each of which has failed to achieve its goals. The past two decades have

taught us that military power is ineffective for achieving long-term U.S. goals in Somalia.

1992–1994: Black Hawks Down

The collapse of President Siad Barre’s government in January 1991, following years of tension and periodic bloodshed among the country’s major clans, wreaked havoc on infrastructure and agriculture and displaced nearly a million people. These disruptions resulted in famine conditions that killed nearly 300,000 Somalis and displaced another two million.¹⁹

In 1992, the United Nations mobilized to prevent further deaths and to head off a regional refugee crisis that could have sown instability across Somalia’s borders. The United States agreed to lead the initial contingent of peacekeepers, with a mission to facilitate the distribution of humanitarian aid. The UN force eventually grew to include some 37,000 troops from two dozen countries at the start of 1993, before beginning a slow decline to just half that number by the end of 1994. Under the umbrella of a fragile ceasefire, UN forces “brought relief to millions facing starvation, helped to stop the large-scale killings, assisted in the return of refugees, and provided massive humanitarian aid,” according to the world body.²⁰

But these successes belie the intervention’s broader failure. In addition to leading the first UN deployment, the U.S. military launched a separate but parallel mission built on the capabilities of the U.S. Army Rangers and Delta Force commandos and the Army’s Special Operations Aviation Regiment. After clan militias killed 24 Pakistani peacekeepers on June 5, 1993, the United Nations approved Resolution 837, tasking the UN and supporting forces with “disarming all Somali parties, including movements and factions.”²¹ The U.S. commando contingent’s attempts to enforce this resolution ran into intense Somali resistance.

In October, Somali militiamen shot down three U.S. Black Hawk helicopters that were on a daytime mission to capture Mohammed Farah Aidid, a mid-ranking warlord from the influential Habr Gidr clan. In the ensuing battle, which lasted through the night and into the next day, 18 U.S. soldiers were killed

and hundreds—maybe as many as a thousand—of Somalis also died.²²

Although hardened clan soldiers comprised the backbone of the Somali force in what the Western press dubbed the “Battle of Mogadishu,” these fighters were joined by perhaps hundreds of Somali civilians who viewed the Americans as oppressive occupiers and considered the U.S. operation an illegitimate invasion of their city. To mobilize the civilian masses, the fighters walked the city streets with megaphones, calling, “Come out and defend your homes.”²³

The humiliating October 1993 raid was the beginning of the end of the first round of U.S. intervention in Somalia. American forces withdrew by early 1994. The withdrawal of the rest of the UN mission followed a year later. The UN never achieved its goal of broad reconciliation and sustainable governance. After the foreign forces departed, fighting resumed as the country continued to fracture.

1993–2009: Piracy’s Rise

The departure of U.S.-led foreign forces from Somalia, beginning in 1994, did not decrease the country’s need for humanitarian aid. However, ongoing fighting in the wake of the peacekeepers’ withdrawal proved a constant disruption to Somali transport and agriculture, and aid operations became more vulnerable to attack. UN logistician Jema Lember, who in 2008 oversaw transport for the majority of Somalia’s aid, said ground convoys carrying food, medicine, and other assistance had to navigate as many as 300 roadblocks to reach distribution centers.²⁴ In addition, “high inflation, massive population movements, and outbreaks of cholera throughout the country . . . complicated the situation,” the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance explained in its annual report for 2008.²⁵ Although conditions have never again been as dire as in 1992, millions of Somalis—as much as half the country’s population at times—continue to rely on foreign-donated food and other outside assistance.

Banditry on Somalia’s roads became so bad that the UN began shifting aid transport

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from land routes to sea routes. It contracted with coastal freighters, usually based in Kenya, to deliver up to 12,000 tons of food per month to Somali ports, thus bypassing the bandit-infested roads. “That is the most convenient way of delivering the large quantity of food required in Somalia,” Lembere said. By 2008, 90 percent of Somalia’s aid traveled by sea.²⁶

But that did not immediately or completely solve the banditry problem. Thieves simply moved their operations out to sea, using fishing boats to board and hijack the food ships. At first, these pirates claimed they were acting in the interest of Somalia’s starving populace. “They said that the food was not getting to where it was intended because of the warlords,” recalled Frederick Wahutu, a sea captain and senior maritime unionist based in Mombasa, Kenya. “The pirates said, ‘We shall hold the vessels so [that] we get the food.’”²⁷ The seizure of food shipments was a preview of a criminal phenomenon that would expand dramatically in later years.

In the early days, Somali piracy ran the gamut from aggrieved fishermen trying to protect their national waters from illegal incursion to criminals whose only motive was profit. Some pirates got their start in the 1990s by defending Somali fisheries from illegal incursions by foreign fishing trawlers and alleged unauthorized dumping of toxic waste. The collapse of the Somali government in 1991 also meant the collapse of any official fisheries enforcement. With no one to stop them, foreign fishing and waste fleets converged on Somali waters. Somali fishermen could not compete with the industrial fishing operations, and found themselves being shoved out of the market by foreigners who were effectively “stealing their fish,” in the words of U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Terry McKnight.²⁸ Meanwhile, waste dumping may have increased disease rates in coastal fishing towns.²⁹

“And so what [the Somalis] did is they started pirating some of these fishing vessels,” McKnight recalled.³⁰ Armed with AK-47s, the Somalis would board a foreign fishing vessel and demand a fee, often no more than a few

hundred dollars. These pirates called themselves “coast guards,” a habit that caught on with other pirate bands. Some of the fisheries-enforcing pirates “defected” to larger pirate bands targeting commercial ships that could command richer ransoms.

Over time, these different models of piracy coalesced into one, as the smaller, “coast guard” pirate bands were literally bought out by the larger, strictly criminal ones. In 2007 piracy grew to such proportions as to warrant an international military response. At first, counterpiracy operations were driven by the need to protect the UN food ships. European navies contributed small contingents of warships to escort one food ship at a time through Somali waters to its destination port. These operations have been hugely successful. No UN food ship has been hijacked while under escort.³¹

But in 2008, recorded pirate attacks in the region increased threefold, and pirates began targeting undefended commercial ships instead of the escorted food ships. The majority of the pirates belonged to only a handful of networks, most of them based in Puntland. Those networks comprised Somalia’s most lucrative “industry,” with annual revenues that exceeded \$30 million.³²

Using larger boats and high-tech tools including global positioning systems and commercially available satellite imagery, pirates extended the range of their assaults, capturing vessels as far as 500 miles from the Somali coast.³³ Pirates seized more than 40 large vessels in 2008, and a similar number in just the first quarter of 2009, across a two-million square mile swath of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Captured ships fetched ransoms as high as \$3 million.³⁴

“Piracy has affected the entire shipping industry,” said Khalid Shapi, managing director of a large tour company in Mombasa that works closely with cruise lines.³⁵ As insurance rates climb, some shippers have chosen to reroute their vessels the long way around the southern tip of the African continent instead of using the Suez Canal–Gulf of Aden–Indian Ocean shortcut that takes them through

Somali waters.³⁶ Higher insurance rates for some ships, and the cost of the longer, safer voyage for others, can translate into higher prices for consumers.

The increase in, and evolution of, Somali piracy in 2008 prompted a sea change in the international military response. From a limited operation dedicated solely to escorting UN food ships, naval deployments to the waters off of East Africa expanded in scale and scope. A series of UN resolutions called on seafaring nations to use military force to protect shipping. Resolution 1851, the most important of them, called for nations to “take all necessary measures that are appropriate in Somalia,” up to and including attacks on pirates’ land bases.³⁷ With that measure, the UN effectively authorized a land invasion of Somalia—a curious step, considering how the last UN land operation in Somalia turned out.

As the world’s biggest maritime power—and biggest import market, served mostly by sea trade—the United States assumed informal leadership of the emerging counterpiracy coalition. By late 2008 the coalition included more than 20 warships from a dozen nations, including seemingly unlikely contributors such as China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia.³⁸ In 2009, even Iran sent ships.³⁹

Two U.S.-led task forces made up the bulk of the naval forces, and American headquarters helped coordinate warships’ movements, according to McKnight.⁴⁰ The U.S. Navy even modified one of its transport vessels into a makeshift floating prison for holding pirate suspects until they could be rendered to courts in Somalia, Kenya, or the United States.⁴¹

Despite its large size, the counterpiracy flotilla was still too small to escort each of the thousands of merchant vessels that transit East African waters every month. Instead of the escort model used for the UN mission, the flotilla patrolled a secret “security corridor”—a narrow sea highway, essentially—the location of which was relayed via radio to incoming commercial ships. “We say, ‘If you can transit in this corridor, we will offer you as much protection as we possibly can,’” McKnight said.⁴²

But the corridor—and the whole broad naval effort versus pirates, for that matter—was a failure. Military efforts did nothing to halt the increase in piracy. Pirates continued to expand their reach, and even captured ships *south* of Kenya’s main port of Mombasa, a region previously thought safe.⁴³

While Captain Phillips was successfully freed unharmed in April 2009, the U.S.-led counterpiracy campaign has not stopped piracy. At best, U.S. naval deployments might support the occasional dramatic rescue of captured seafarers, but they still do not address piracy’s underlying causes. An even larger multilateral effort to escort commercial ships might guarantee the safety of shipping in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, but only at great cost. Indeed, there are not nearly enough warships *in the entire world* to make such escorts possible, according to naval expert Norman Friedman.⁴⁴

Martin Murphy, a piracy analyst from the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, argues that “we won’t be able to defeat [piracy] until the Somali political situation gets cleared up.”⁴⁵ But U.S. military intervention in the Somali political situation has played a role in preventing the Somali situation from getting “cleared up.” In that way, U.S. strategy on land in Somalia competes with the U.S. strategy at sea. The instability on land, possibly prolonged by U.S. intervention, guarantees continuing instability at sea that no amount of U.S. military force can resolve. More to the point, any effort to defeat piracy is sure to fail, and in the short-term such efforts merely shift the costs away from shippers who should have the primary responsibility for ensuring the security of their ships and cargo.

2002–2009: Proxy War

Around the same time that pirates were first dipping their toes into East African waters, U.S. ground forces were tentatively returning to the region as part of the so-called “Global War on Terror.” In late 2001 and throughout 2002, the Pentagon initiated counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan, the Philippines, and East Africa. The African

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operations targeted suspected al Qaeda operatives whom the Bush administration said were hiding out in Somalia’s rural wastes, including the masterminds behind the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania and the 2002 attack on a popular international hotel in Mombasa, Kenya.⁴⁶

But the Pentagon still reeled from the 1993 deaths of 18 U.S. troops in the Battle of Mogadishu; the United States wasn’t about to establish a permanent base inside Somalia or undertake overt large-scale operations. Instead, the second round of U.S. intervention on the ground in Somalia would be low-key and indirect, reflecting the philosophy coalescing within the nascent U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM.⁴⁷ But these operations would be no more successful than those of a decade earlier.

In October 2002, a force of 800 U.S. Marines landed in Djibouti, north of Somalia, aiming to “coerce others to get rid of their terrorist problem,” in the cryptic words of Army General Tommy Franks. The resulting “Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa” grew to at least 2,000 people. While most of the task force’s personnel were devoted to training and humanitarian missions, a significant Special Forces component undertook more “kinetic” operations aimed at disrupting suspected terrorist networks.⁴⁸

The new U.S. presence coincided with the slow rise of the Islamic Courts Union, a loose alliance of Islamists who had broken clan ranks to form Somalia’s first grassroots political organization in recent memory. The movement also included a strong core of international businessmen. Its armed wing, al Shabab, boasted some of the country’s fiercest fighters. In the early 2000s, the ICU ventured from its stronghold in north Mogadishu and began to seize and hold territory in southern Somalia, imposing sharia law as it went. Ahmed, the moderate Islamist, and co-clansman Hassan Dahir Aweys, a hardliner and fiery ex-army officer, emerged as the ICU’s most prominent leaders.⁴⁹

With growing popular support, the ICU and its al Shabab fighters toppled or usurped

warlord after warlord until most of the country was under ICU rule. In 2004, midway through the ICU’s rise, the U.S. underwrote the establishment of a secular, clan-based opposition group calling itself the Transitional Federal Government.⁵⁰ Formed in Kenya, the TFG eventually established a small base in the town of Baidoa, north of Mogadishu.

Despite Western backing for the TFG, the Courts strengthened their hold on Somalia. Movies, popular music, and dancing were banned, but for the first time in a decade, there was a measure of stability in much of the country, and a trickle of business investment.⁵¹ Propelled by its growing confidence and prosperity, the ICU cracked down on piracy in those regions that it controlled, and in late 2006 launched an attack on Baidoa in a bid to eliminate TFG opposition.⁵²

For Washington, that was the tipping point. There was little evidence that the Courts’ rule would pose a threat to U.S. interests.⁵³ But Washington had cast its lot with the secular TFG, and when the TFG teetered, the United States took action. In stark contrast to the 1993 intervention, however, the 2006 repeat involved few U.S. troops on the ground. Instead, Washington turned to an unlikely ally: Ethiopia.

Landlocked, overwhelmingly Christian, and historically fearful of Somali intentions, the Ethiopian government had long eyed Somalia’s excellent deepwater ports, while nervously monitoring the rise of Somali Islamists. In the wake of 9/11, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had carefully aligned his rhetoric with that of the Bush administration, even accusing the Islamic Courts of being “Hell-bent on establishing a Taliban regime in Somalia.”⁵⁴

With the Courts’ rise and the impending destruction of the TFG, Ethiopian and U.S. interests in Somalia dovetailed. In December 2006, Ethiopia invaded Somalia with a powerful armored force. U.S. aircraft and commandos played key supporting roles.⁵⁵

The Islamic Courts appeared to collapse in the face of Ethiopian tanks and American gunships. In the months following the inva-

sion, as many as 50,000 Ethiopian troops were garrisoned in Mogadishu and smaller Somali towns, alongside the ragtag, underpaid forces of the TFG.⁵⁶

Taking advantage of the momentary peace, in early 2007 the vanguard of an African Union peacekeeping contingent arrived in Mogadishu and promptly fortified key strategic locations, including the airport, the new seaport, and abandoned government facilities that the TFG hoped to eventually reoccupy. The AU authorized up to 8,000 peacekeepers to be provided by member states, but the African Union Mission in Somalia, or AMISOM, topped out at 4,000 troops from Uganda and Burundi.

The result was a rough patchwork of security establishments, all of them technically allied to the TFG, but none of them fully cooperating with each other or with their supposed client. The AU, for one, had opposed the Ethiopian invasion, and AMISOM commanders pleaded with the unpopular, heavy-handed Ethiopians to withdraw. This bickering did not help the TFG-allied forces respond when the ICU and al Shabab regrouped and launched a campaign of escalating attacks.⁵⁷

Despite endorsements from the United States, the UN, and the African Union, and AMISOM's protection, the TFG was never more than bait for ICU attacks. During my visit to Mogadishu in November and December 2007, TFG, AU, and Ethiopian forces controlled only a few blocks of Mogadishu, and no high-level TFG officials permanently resided in the city. Al Shabab attacked the TFG and its allies on a nightly basis.

The Islamists steadily regained the ground lost to the Ethiopians and exacted such a heavy toll in men and equipment that Addis Ababa pulled out its troops in early 2009.⁵⁸ Without the Ethiopians, the Transitional Federal Government, by then operating mostly out of the town of Baidoa, north of Mogadishu, collapsed. TFG members fled to Djibouti. In their panic they accepted peace overtures from Ahmed, who was formerly of the ICU, but by then affiliated with an alliance of moderate Islamists.⁵⁹ The humiliated TFG promptly voted to accept Ahmed and his allies

into an enlarged parliament, and then elevated Ahmed to president.

In defeating the TFG and its Ethiopian protectors as a prelude to a peaceful political union, a cadre from the former Islamic Courts Union dealt a stunning blow to foreign powers that had fought for so long to destroy Somalia's Islamists. Ahmed's ascendancy therefore posed a challenge to Western policymakers: would outsiders recognize and support the new government, or would they seek to undermine it? Desperate and out of options, all of the TFG's existing backers—the United States, the UN, the AU, and even Ethiopia—voiced their support for Ahmed, even as he ordered the reestablishment of sharia law across Somalia.⁶⁰ It helped that Ahmed's transition to power took place at the same time as the arrival of a new U.S. administration in Washington.

Reevaluating Somalia's Islamists

For nearly seven years, Washington's overriding priority in Somalia was to prevent the establishment of a popular Islamic regime. But the net effect of American actions during that period only *delayed* the Islamification of the country. The cost of that strategy is measured in the dangerous radicalization of the country's fringe elements and the loss of thousands of lives.

It was arguably inevitable that Somalia would turn to an Islamic government. "The vast majority of Somalis desire a democratic, broadly-based, and responsive government that reflects the Islamic faith as they have practiced it for centuries: with tolerance, moderation, and respect for variation in religious observance," the International Crisis Group reported in 2005.⁶¹ The ICU's brief rule in 2006, with Ahmed at the helm, marked the first hope for such a development and provided the possibility that the resulting stability might finally halt Somalia's humanitarian and piracy problems. The ICU also reduced the likelihood, which was never high to begin

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U.S. intervention on behalf of the strictly secular TFG dashed that hope. It took nearly three years of bloody fighting for Washington to get a second chance. The U.S.-Ethiopian military adventure in Somalia arrived right back where it started, with Ahmed (mostly) in charge.

The failed U.S. strategy did have an unintended positive effect. It hastened the day when every major potential U.S. ally in Somalia clothed themselves in the Islamism that the majority of everyday Somalis want, increasing the prospects that a central government might finally command authority in the country. The differences today are that, one, Ahmed's power base is weaker the second time around; and, two, there is now no realistic alternative. In 2006, there was a secular Somali regime, however powerless and unpopular, in the form of the TFG. This obviously proved a powerful draw for a U.S. administration that had proved to be reluctant to work with avowedly Islamic governments.

Three years later, with Ahmed's successful overthrow of the formerly secular TFG, the realistic choices in Somalia are between competing brands of Islamic government. Washington can wash its hands of Somalia and surrender any and all possibility of shaping the country's development, or it can throw its support behind Ahmed with assistance that actually might have a chance of working, such as financial and logistical support for the AU peacekeepers and diplomatic pressure on African and European nations to increase their own support for the TFG.

The good news for Washington is that Somalis want the same things for their country that the United States wants: peace, stability, and prosperity. They also overwhelmingly reject al Qaeda-style terrorism, as discussed below. "Ultimately, there is no better way to confront jihadism than to assist Somalis" in fashioning a capable and sustainable Islamist government, according to the International Crisis Group.⁶² All of Somalia's troubles grow out of the country's two decades of instability.

Almost any form of government, if it persists and has even a small measure of real authority, would be a big boost for Somali *and* U.S. interests—even if the government in Somalia achieves stability under an Islamic banner.

Somali Islamists and al Qaeda

Somali Islamists have a history of rejecting al Qaeda's designs on their country. Despite that history, the U.S. government suspects that a handful of al Qaeda operatives are hiding out in rural Somalia, and it has targeted these individuals with air and missile raids. One such strike, in March 2008, was credited with killing Aden Hashi Ayro, described by the *New York Times* as "one of al Qaeda's top operatives in East Africa."⁶³ In September, one of Africa's most wanted terrorists, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, was killed in a raid in the insurgent-held town of Barawe, approximately 155 miles south of Mogadishu. Eye-witnesses claimed that Nabhan, wanted in connection with an attack on a beach resort that killed 13 people, and a near-simultaneous failed attack on an Israeli airliner in his native Kenya, was killed by U.S. military personnel flying in helicopters, but U.S. officials would only confirm that forces from the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command were involved.⁶⁴ Notwithstanding these occasional attacks on suspected terrorists, U.S. fears that Somalia might become a large-scale al Qaeda haven have never been based on a thorough understanding of Somali culture.

Before the Ethiopian invasion, al Qaeda had only fleeting and tenuous connections to Somalia. A small number of al Qaeda fighters reportedly advised clan forces leading up to the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, but even those fighters were mostly shunned by Somalis.⁶⁵ On reports that bin Laden might set up shop in Somalia to avoid U.S. retaliation after 9/11, a Somali diplomat told the BBC that Somalia was an "unlikely" hideout for the terrorist leader. "Somalis talk too much," the diplomat said.⁶⁶

It wasn't until *after* the Ethiopian invasion that an increasingly bloodthirsty and radicalized al Shabab began adopting al Qaeda

rhetoric.⁶⁷ The first reliable reports of significant numbers of foreign fighters came in May 2009, when al Shabab launched its counterattack against Ahmed's new regime in Mogadishu. These foreign Islamists never fully integrated into the al Shabab structure, however, and one former hard-line Islamist derided them as "jailbirds."⁶⁸

For all the allegations and alarmist rhetoric regarding terrorists in Somalia, the country's conflict remains rooted in clan rivalries going back centuries. Somalis are fighting over the shape and leadership of their national society. They are not fighting in service of al Qaeda's global jihad.

Inasmuch as al Qaeda can exploit lawlessness, Somalia remains a (minor) international terror risk. Aside from the small contingent of foreign fighters assisting al Shabab, there may be al Qaeda operatives still hiding in the Somali countryside, and more could join them. But the prospect of al Qaeda creating a substantial infrastructure in Somalia, as it has done in Pakistan or Afghanistan, is unlikely.

The best hope of flushing out the few al Qaeda operatives who do reside in Somalia lies in the establishment of genuine, nationwide law and order, with police and courts whose reach extends beyond a few blocks in Mogadishu. At the moment, Ahmed's supporters are the only people who have any chance of imposing that order. Bin Laden seems keenly aware of that. In March 2009, the al Qaeda leader released an audio recording calling on al Shabab to destroy Ahmed's regime.⁶⁹

Somali Piracy under the Islamists

Ahmed's regime is also well positioned to address Somalia's piracy crisis. Since piracy became big news in 2008, it's been popular in the West to conflate pirates and Islamists. "There is reason to believe that militant groups in the south are cooperating with pirates," said University of Maryland researcher Jana Shakarian.⁷⁰

But Somali Islamists have not only denied any partnership with pirates, they have de-

clared piracy un-Islamic and vowed to destroy pirate networks. "We will not absolve the pirates and those associated to them, in the name of Allah we will behead them if they come in our hand," one al Shabab commander said.⁷¹

Likewise, pirates deny any connection to Islamists. "We just want the money," Sugule Ali, a pirate spokesman, told the *New York Times*, after his associates seized a Ukrainian vessel laden with weapons.⁷²

The Islamic Courts Union suppressed piracy during the height of its power in 2006. More recently, Muhammad Shamsaddin Megalommatis, a Somali writer and al Shabab supporter, proposed the most sensible international counter-piracy strategy so far: a UN-supported Somali fisheries agency, which would travel up the Somali coast, registering all fishermen, in order to separate them from criminals.⁷³ The registration process would serve as the germ of a truly functional national maritime security apparatus, which U.S. State Department sources said is the only permanent solution to combating piracy.⁷⁴

The TFG is already laying the groundwork for a foreign-funded maritime agency. In June, Ahmed's government recruited 500 young men to form the core of a new naval security force, tasked with "routine scrutiny on the Somali waters."⁷⁵ The force lacks training and equipment, but it's an encouraging start.

Somali Islamists and Humanitarian Aid

Somalia is "Africa's greatest humanitarian crisis," according to Peter Smerdon, a spokesman for the UN World Food Program. An estimated 20 percent of Somalis are at risk of starvation. Fighting and famine have driven hundreds of thousands of Somalis across the borders to Kenya and Ethiopia, exacerbating public health and employment crises in those countries. Instability and fickle weather patterns sustain the suffering. "For years these people have been hammered by drought, conflict, drought," Smerdon said. "It's become a spiral."⁷⁶

Hawa Abdi, the director of one of Somalia's biggest refugee camps on the outskirts of

For all the allegations and alarmist rhetoric regarding terrorists in Somalia, the country's conflict remains rooted in clan rivalries going back centuries.

Washington has consistently underestimated the deep undercurrent of popular resistance to foreign, and particularly American, intervention in Somalia.

Mogadishu, said that stability is the only solution to this spreading humanitarian crisis. “What we need the most for the Somali population is peace,” Abdi said.⁷⁷

Since Islamists are the only ones with any recent record of forming a national government, they are the only ones who can solve the humanitarian crisis, by breaking the violence-starvation cycle that prevents Somalis from eventually feeding themselves. In the meantime, stability will ensure that the UN can adequately feed the Somali population. A healthy population will eventually be able to return to its fields and herds.

Fears that Islamists might attempt to disrupt aid shipments, thereby short-circuiting any eventual recovery and otherwise sowing discontent, are unfounded. In late 2008, Islamic Courts fighters recaptured the aid port of Merka from the faltering TFG and cooperated with the UN to ensure timely food delivery. What’s more, the Islamists have long campaigned against the widespread, clan-run roadblocks that forced the UN to shift its aid operations to the sea, where they can be threatened by pirates. An established Islamic regime would give the UN more flexibility in addressing, and hopefully ending, Somalia’s humanitarian crisis.⁷⁸

Recommendations

Crafting an effective Somalia strategy depends on the establishment of a clear pecking order between the State Department and the Department of Defense with regard to East Africa. Military intervention and counterterrorism cannot dictate overall U.S. policy for Somalia. That’s putting the tactics “cart” before the strategy “horse.” Rather, Washington should favor a stable Somalia, which is the long-term U.S. interest, through the means that are most effective. Terrorism and piracy eventually will wither in the soil of a prospering Somali state.

To that end, the Obama administration should reconsider its campaign of air and missile strikes, approved by the previous adminis-

tration to target suspected al Qaeda operatives. While air strikes might kill a handful of terrorists, they contribute to widespread, festering anti-Americanism that could undermine broader U.S. efforts towards stabilizing Somalia.

To ensure that Ethiopia is dissuaded from repeating its military intervention in Somalia, the U.S. government should discontinue any military assistance to Addis Ababa that could be used to support an invasion. That would mean close scrutiny of existing U.S.-Ethiopian military cooperation.

To a great extent, U.S. interests in Somalia will be better served by Washington doing *less* in the country. Washington has consistently underestimated the deep undercurrent of popular resistance to foreign, and particularly American, intervention in Somalia. The author had his own brief encounters with this resistance in 2007, during a month-long visit to Mogadishu. Children would point at me driving past and yell, “*Gallo*”—slang for “infidel.” And when I dropped by a small movie theater near the city’s old seaport for a pre-arranged interview with the owner, an armed and angry mob gathered, threatening violence if I didn’t leave. Such mobs are a frequent occurrence, especially in the wake of U.S. air and missile raids on suspected terrorist safe-houses in Somalia.⁷⁹

Direct intervention too easily skews towards military action, and military action has proved overwhelmingly counterproductive. Where intervention might work, it should be as indirect and non-threatening as possible, and should reflect a *friendly* African face. In U.S. dealings with Somalia, proxies are advisable, but only proxies that are acceptable to Somalis. Ethiopia, for one, is not acceptable. Wherever possible, U.S. efforts should be coordinated through the UN and, especially, the AU or its member states.

For starters, even under the most optimistic projections, Ahmed’s government will need help providing day-to-day security in Mogadishu. This should be achieved primarily through greater U.S. logistical support to the AU’s AMISOM peacekeeping force.

Ahmed has voiced his support for a greater African Union role in securing Somalia.⁸⁰ His preference for the AU is rooted in experience. Despite disparaging overtones in international press coverage, AMISOM has proved surprisingly effective in extremely difficult circumstances and is the best short-term solution to Somalia's security crisis.⁸¹ In 2007, I watched as just 2,000 Ugandan troops held all of Mogadishu's strategic locations—the airport, the seaport, government facilities, and critical road junctures—against Ethiopian incursion and periodic al Shabab assaults. Neighborhoods under AMISOM's control were the most vibrant and prosperous in all of Mogadishu.⁸²

Captain Paddy Ankunda, an AMISOM spokesman, said the key to AMISOM's success is that it drew troops only from nations with no designs on Somali sovereignty. While Somalis chafe at any foreign presence, they chafe less at AMISOM than they did at the Ethiopian and U.S. interventions.

The AU authorized 8,000 troops for AMISOM, and Uganda, Burundi, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone pledged to provide them. So far, though, only Uganda and Burundi have made good on their promises, effectively capping AMISOM at half its approved strength.⁸³ The U.S. government should pressure Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone to mobilize its peacekeepers.

Washington can help facilitate AMISOM's expansion to its full authorized strength. In the past, additional Ugandan and Burundian troops have been pledged, but were stranded in their home countries due to a lack of aircraft to transport them to Mogadishu.⁸⁴ That must not happen again. In October 2008, the U.S. Air Force established a new headquarters in Germany, the 17th Air Force, to oversee African air operations. In 2009, the 17th Air Force helped ferry AU peacekeepers bound for Darfur. Washington should extend the same courtesy to AMISOM.

AMISOM sources said the peacekeepers also need donations of armored vehicles capable of surviving al Shabab attacks.⁸⁵ The U.S. military is a world leader in these types of vehicles, having developed and fielded thousands

of the so-called "Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected" trucks in Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington should carefully consider donating a simplified MRAP variant to AMISOM.

Over the medium term, Ahmed's government must provide its own security. The ongoing financial burden of paying and arming security forces is the biggest obstacle to that happening. In April, the UN convened a fundraising conference in Brussels, aiming to secure \$160 million in new funding for Ahmed's security forces and AMISOM.⁸⁶ In June, Washington sweetened the resulting pledges with a donation of some 40 tons of arms and ammunition for TFG forces, delivered via AMISOM.⁸⁷ Direct arms shipments are unnecessary, when other nations with closer ties to Somalia could be pressured to assist, instead. Washington should apply diplomatic pressure to encourage U.S. allies in Africa and the Middle East to increase their financial and material support for the TFG.⁸⁸

To help combat piracy, the Obama administration should first voice its opposition to other nations' illegal fishing and dumping off the Somali coast, and make good on that rhetoric with sanctions against any nation whose companies are caught illegally operating in Somali waters. Next, the United States should support the creation of a Somali fisheries registration agency. For that, the Obama administration should work through the UN and AU. Many pirates are based in the breakaway regions of Puntland and Somaliland, whose relations with Ahmed's government have been strained. The State Department should help broker an agreement between Mogadishu and the breakaway regions to facilitate a maritime agency that can operate across Somalia.

To help mitigate the humanitarian crisis, the United States need only maintain its high level of aid to Somalia (currently around \$100 million annually). As Ahmed's government finds its footing, and security in the country improves, U.S. humanitarian aid will help the population transition back to a normal, self-sustaining way of life.

As for terrorism, Somalia isn't, and never has been, a major terrorism threat. To whatever

Even under the most optimistic projections, Ahmed's government will need help providing day-to-day security in Mogadishu.

Nonmilitary support of Ahmed should allow Somalia to flourish and cause extremism to wither. However, potential spoilers are numerous and progress is by no means guaranteed.

er minimal degree extremists might take root in the country, the best antidote remains Ahmed's moderate Islamist regime. Nonmilitary support of Ahmed should allow Somalia to flourish and cause extremism to wither. In this way, what the United States doesn't do is at least as important as what it *does* do. Washington should be willing to assist the country, while resisting the urge to intervene militarily.

With a popular moderate Islamic government in power and growing international support, the country's prospects are the best they've been in 20 years; however, potential spoilers are numerous and progress is by no means guaranteed.

Somalia might have reached this promising point earlier, during the ICU's brief rule in 2006. Instead of befriending the Islamic Courts Union, Washington waged a losing war against it, based on the bad habit of military intervention in countries whose problems have no foreign military solution.

Somalia represents a valuable object lesson in *realpolitik* for the United States and emerging Islamic states. Rather than fight losing wars that only further radicalize fringe populations, the United States might be better off indirectly encouraging those moderate Islamic regimes that respect individual liberty and human rights by supporting their peaceful development through nonmilitary means. If Islam is likely to assume a central political role in certain countries, Washington has nothing to gain from resisting such a transformation, and everything to gain from forging frameworks for diplomacy, compromise, and, one hopes, eventual meaningful relationships with moderate Islamic regimes.

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