

“Somalia: Spiraling Toward War”

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Somalia's serial catastrophes have consistently exceeded our ability to imagine worst-case scenarios. That may be happening again. The country is facing two inter-related crises — consolidation of power by Islamic hardliners in Mogadishu, and the threat of war between Ethiopia and the Islamists — which could plunge much of the Horn of Africa to new depths of instability, violence, and radicalism.

Only a short time ago, hopes were high that moderate leadership would emerge in the ascendant Islamist movement and negotiate a government of national unity with the weak Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Most of the Somali public were euphoric following the June 2006 victory of the Consultative Council of Islamic Courts (CCIC) over a coalition of U.S.-backed militia leaders, and hoped the Islamists' stunning rise to power would end Somalia's long era of warlordism and state collapse.

There were reasons for optimism. The Courts' most visible leader, Sheikh Sharif, was known as a moderate. The CCIC reassured the international community that it sought peace, the rule of law, and democratic government. Its representatives met with the TFG and agreed to a cessation of hostilities. Public security in Mogadishu dramatically improved, allowing thousands in the Somali diaspora to flock back home.

But hopes have been dashed by the rapid consolidation of power on the part of hardline elements within the CCIC. Led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, the hardliners control most of the sharia militias, the flow of weapons arriving via Eritrea, and funds pouring in from both non-state and state sponsors of the CCIC, including Iran. This virtual monopoly on coercive and financial assets has allowed the hardliners to outmaneuver moderates and dictate policies. A series of alarming edicts seems intended to systematically eliminate any potential source of opposition. The CCIC has outlawed group meetings at which politics are discussed, insisted on direct control of the flow of international humanitarian aid, and increased morality policing against cinemas and social gatherings. It has called for the abolition of civil society organizations and marginalized the many business and civic leaders who lent the CCIC both moral and material support in the past year.

Many Somali figures who initially voiced enthusiastic support for the courts in June are now privately expressing deep anxiety; others are trying to organize alliances of moderate Islamists, businessmen, civic leaders, and the diaspora to counterbalance the hardliners. An impending power struggle inside Mogadishu could turn bloody — jihadi cells in Mogadishu have in past years used political assassination frequently against real or potential rivals.

Worse, Aweys and his allies have embarked on a series of acts designed to provoke a war with Ethiopia. The CCIC has forged close relations with Ethiopia's enemy Eritrea, hosting and channeling arms and funds to two armed insurgencies targeting the Ethiopian government, the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. Aweys has invoked irredentist claims on Somali-inhabited portions of Ethiopia (as well as

declaring Kenya "an enemy of the Somali people"); the sharia militias have made a number of provocative forays toward border areas with Ethiopia; and Aweys passes no opportunity to engage in inflammatory anti-Ethiopian rhetoric.

Baiting Ethiopia is not hard work — the Meles regime has always viewed Somali Islamists, moderates and hardliners alike, as an unacceptable threat, and might have targeted the CCIC regardless of the type of leadership it produced. But the hardliners' actions since June have guaranteed escalating hostilities. One can criticize Ethiopian policy toward Somalia on a number of counts, but Ethiopia has every right to view current actions by the CCIC as tantamount to a declaration of war.

There are powerful reasons why the hardliners want to provoke tensions and perhaps even war with Ethiopia. War with Ethiopia would give the jihadis their jihad, allowing hardliners to mobilize broad public support, conflate their Islamist agenda with Somali nationalist sentiments, attract more outside assistance from external Islamic patrons, and marginalize moderate voices within the CCIC.

If war between Ethiopia and the Somali Islamists occurs on a significant scale — and the two are now dangerously close to clashing — the result could be disastrous for both countries. Most Somalis will react fiercely to Ethiopian attacks on Somali soil and will mobilize in support of the CCIC. Ethiopia could find itself bogged down in a war it cannot win, with few reliable local allies. It would also face growing insurgencies in Oromo and Somali regional states. Somalia today is increasingly susceptible to a dangerous cocktail of radical Islamist, proto-nationalist, anti-Western, and anti-Ethiopian resentments which Ethiopian intervention will only make far worse. For Somalia, war would again make the country the site of widespread violence and population displacement. Local governance structures could collapse and famine return. Spillover of both refugees and radicalism would be likely in Kenya. The only winner in a war scenario would be the jihadists.

The best the United States and Ethiopia can do now is to help create conditions that deny the Somali hardliners what they most want — jihad against a threatening external enemy — and force the Islamists instead to face the difficult, mundane, and divisive policy questions of governance. Engaging in everyday politics and administrative responsibilities in Mogadishu and surrounding areas could force the CCIC to adopt more moderate and pragmatic policies. If it refuses to adapt, its radicalism will be increasingly exposed, and its local and external opposition will multiply.

U.S. policymakers will be tempted to invoke the formulaic call to "empower the moderates" and "marginalize the radicals." There is little evidence that this tactic works; in the past it has backfired, de-legitimizing and even endangering Somali moderates. If normal politics in Mogadishu can be allowed to take its course — a scenario which is only possible if war can be averted — that will do far more to encourage moderation and pragmatism than anything else the outside world can do. The external actors that may be in the best position to have a moderating influence on the Islamists are those that currently support the CCIC. These include U.S. friends Egypt and Yemen, as well as Eritrea. They should be worried and alarmed by the CCIC's ever more extreme policies.

There are many other "light footprint" policy initiatives the United States can and should consider that can help prevent a disastrous war and reduce radicalization in Somalia. First, the United States and other countries must press the CCIC leadership to clarify its positions on key issues, ranging from respect for the borders of neighboring states to women's rights and the status of proportional clan representation in the CCIC's governing bodies. The Courts have hedged on these issues or made contradictory statements for too long. The West should also more vigorously insist on the accountability that comes with the CCIC's claim of authority over most of south-central Somalia, including responsibility for insuring that no terrorist activities emanate from Somalia. The United States must continue to press Ethiopia for restraint in the face of the real threats to Ethiopian interests posed by the CCIC, lest conflict escalate. And though odds of success are remote, the United States should continue to promote dialogue between the Courts and the TFG to negotiate a government of national unity.

The Somali diaspora and media must do their part too, holding the Courts accountable for their reckless inclination to pursue unnecessary confrontation with a powerful neighboring state and insisting the CCIC devote its energy to providing the Somali people with the good governance they so desperately want.

In the long run, real peace and state revival will only be achieved in Somalia when the two principal antagonists — Ethiopia and the Mogadishu-based, Hawiye clan dominated, Islamist movement — reach an agreement to co-exist. That deal will require a level of pragmatism and compromise that neither side has shown any sign of possessing.

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