

Somalia: Regional Involvement and Implications for US Policy
Paper Presented at the
American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research
October 4, 2006

By David H. Shinn
Adjunct Professor
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University

Regional Involvement in Somalia

Countries throughout northeast Africa and the Gulf have been involved in Somalia since it became a failed state in 1991. The defeat earlier this year of the warlords in Mogadishu and the rise of the Islamic Courts has resulted in a significant increase in the amount of outside engagement. This growing interest, sometimes meddling, by a variety of states in the region has important implications for US policy well beyond Somalia.

Somalia's immediate neighbors—Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti—have the most direct interest in and concerns about Somalia. Conflict in Somalia impacts their situation just as unrest inside their borders tends to affect developments in Somalia. Movement in both directions of refugees between Somalia and all three neighbors has a long history. The security issue is particularly important because large Somali populations live inside Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. Prior to its disintegration, Mogadishu had a policy of actively seeking to incorporate these populations as part of Somalia. This policy became dormant after 1991. A few of the extremists on the Islamic Courts recently revived the concept, at least in the case of Ethiopia. Kenya also remains concerned about the revival of Somali irredentism. The self-declared independent Republic of Somaliland separates Somalia from Djibouti. As a result, Djibouti does not feel the same threat.

Somalia's Immediate Neighbors

Ethiopia's border with Somalia and Somaliland extends almost 1,000 miles. The drought prone and natural gas rich Somali region of Ethiopia, most of which is known as the Ogaden, constitutes about one-quarter of the country's land area. Never completely pacified, Ethiopian security forces today face active resistance from the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF). Although based in the Ogaden, the ONLF and UWSLF almost certainly receive sanctuary and support in neighboring Somalia. Addis Ababa worries that a hostile government in Mogadishu would strongly support the ONLF and UWSLF and revive Somalia's earlier goal of encouraging the Somali-inhabited areas of Ethiopia to join it. For this reason, Ethiopia has supported Abdullahi Yusuf's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which does not favor such a policy. Ethiopia also has growing concerns about the rise of the Islamic Courts and the support they are receiving from Eritrea, a country that is virtually at war with Ethiopia following their border dispute. Several of the Islamic Court leaders previously held senior positions in al-Ittihad al-Islami, an organization that acknowledged in the mid-1990s that it conducted terrorist attacks inside Ethiopia.

The most recent report by the Monitoring Group on Somalia established by the UN Security Council covers the period from November 2005 until April 2006. It states that Ethiopia provided at least three separate consignments of arms, including mortars, machine guns, assault rifles, anti-tank weapons, and ammunition to the TFG during this period. Although Ethiopia continues to deny that it has sent any of its troops into Somalia, there are credible reports from journalists, UN sources, and diplomats that limited numbers have appeared in Puntland and the TFG capital in Baidoa. The most recent International Crisis Group (ICG) report on Somalia concluded that Ethiopia has provided military materiel and training to the TFG since its inception in 2004. The ICG added that Ethiopian deployments seem to be intended to protect Baidoa and to establish a buffer zone along part of the Ethiopia-Somalia border. Ethiopia also favors sending a regional peacekeeping force to Somalia as a way to prop up the TFG.

There are many who argue that Ethiopia seeks a weak and disunited Somalia so that it does not pose a security threat. I agree this would be Ethiopia's goal if the only alternative was a strong, united, and **hostile** Somalia. Ethiopia is prepared to accept and may even prefer, however, a strong, united, and **friendly** Somalia. Such a government would be better positioned than a weak and disunited one to deal with groups that threaten Ethiopia's interests. The problem for Addis Ababa is that any Ethiopian military presence inside Somalia, either unilaterally or under the guise of a regional peacekeeping mission, significantly inflames Somali nationalism and antagonism towards Ethiopia. The leadership of the Islamic Courts, especially the more extremist members, has used this argument effectively in recent months to mobilize Somali support for its agenda.

Kenya once had the responsibility for leading the effort by the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to achieve a solution to the political problems in Somalia. As a result, Kenya had a reputation as the honest broker among the seven (Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Djibouti, Eritrea, Sudan, and Somalia) IGAD countries. Following the ascendance earlier this year of the Islamic Courts, Kenya joined with Ethiopia in strong support of the TFG. Kenya now favors an African peacekeeping force in Somalia but has not offered to contribute troops. Kenya's foreign minister has even gone so far as to suggest that an agreement between the TFG and the Islamic Courts cannot prevent deployment of the peacekeeping force. Recent strong Kenyan support for the TFG may be driven by fears that the Islamic Courts intend to pursue incorporation of Somali-inhabited territory in Kenya's northeastern region, which shares a 425-mile long border with Somalia.

Separated from Somalia by relatively peaceful Somaliland, Djibouti has more freedom of action than Ethiopia and Kenya in dealing with the Islamic Courts. In December 2005 Djibouti acknowledged providing to the TFG 3,000 military uniforms, which it claimed were intended for the police. Djibouti, unlike Ethiopia and Kenya, is now urging that the TFG and Islamic Courts reach an understanding at the talks in Khartoum designed for this purpose. Djibouti does not support a peacekeeping mission in Somalia and recently urged that outsiders not interfere in the country. In the past month, Djibouti received a senior delegation from the Islamic Courts and seems to have aligned itself with Eritrea and Sudan on Somalia. Djibouti is an overwhelmingly Muslim country and increasingly dependent on Arab investment, which may account for its greater willingness to accept the Islamic Courts.

IGAD Countries on the Outer Ring

IGAD members Uganda, Sudan, and Eritrea are important players in Somalia, although they are not neighbors. Until recently, Uganda did not show any particular interest in Somalia. The reasons for this newfound involvement are unclear, but Uganda is the only country so far to offer troops for a regional peacekeeping force in Somalia. In September its parliament approved, reportedly conditionally, deployment of 1,000 troops for Somalia. Together with Ethiopia and Kenya, Uganda now supports the TFG. One of the extremist members of the Islamic Courts warned Uganda not to send troops to Somalia because he did want “a Somali bullet to hit a Ugandan.”

Sudan has had representatives in Mogadishu since the UN peacekeeping mission (UNOSOM) arrived in 1993. Initially, Sudan seemed most interested in maintaining contact with Somali Islamists. This almost certainly remains part of Khartoum’s agenda but its role is expanding. Both Sudan and Somalia are members of the Arab League and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir is the current chairman of the organization. The Arab League is sponsoring the reconciliation talks between the TFG and the Islamic Courts and Bashir is in charge of the process. Media accounts continue to cite Sudan, together with Uganda, as one of the troop contributing countries for a peacekeeping mission to Somalia. Sudan has never publicly confirmed such a commitment. In fact, President Bashir reportedly expressed his surprise in mid-September at the African Union (AU) decision to send a force to Somalia. The chairman of the Executive Council of the Islamic Courts, Sheikh Sharif, said in early September that Sudan had confirmed to him that it would not send troops. One can assume that Sudan is sympathetic to the position of Somalia’s Islamic Courts. If the TFG and the Courts reach some kind of agreement, Sudan may then be willing to contribute peacekeepers.

Eritrea, a country that is about half Muslim and half Christian, is playing one of the strangest games in Somalia. Eritrea’s primary concern is Ethiopia; Asmara will take just about any action to harm Ethiopia and Addis Ababa is happy to reciprocate. Eritrea sees Somalia as an opportunity to put additional pressure on Ethiopia by supporting the Islamic Courts. According to the last two reports of the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia covering the period from May 2005 to April 2006, Eritrea has provided by air and by sea substantial quantities of arms to the Courts, ONLF, and the governor of Lower Shabelle to counter support provided by Ethiopia to the TFG. The Monitoring Group carefully and thoroughly documented these deliveries. Eritrea responded that the reports were “baseless and unfounded.” Eritrea supports the reconciliation process in Khartoum and opposes a regional peacekeeping mission for Somalia. A senior Eritrean official recently called the AU proposal “unwise and fraught with unnecessary complications.” The TFG prime minister charged that Eritrea is “assisting the terrorists” in Somalia.

Egypt and Libya

Egypt has had an interest in the Somali coast dating back to the 19th century. Egypt shares a membership with Somalia in the Arab League and Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) as well as the AU. In more recent decades, its involvement in Somalia has also been

closely linked to the Nile water issue. Egypt is almost totally dependent on the Nile for its fresh water. Ethiopia is the source of 86 percent of that water. Egypt and Sudan have by treaty divided all of the Nile water between the two of them, much to the consternation of Ethiopia. Although Egypt's relations with Ethiopia are currently cordial, the Nile water question hangs over them like the sword of Damocles. Egypt periodically has used Somalia as a pawn in order to put pressure on or weaken Ethiopia. Egypt supported Somalia, for example, during its war against Ethiopia in 1977. Egypt has been relatively quiet on Somalia in recent months, although it did participate in and publicly supported the Khartoum peace process. The TFG prime minister, by contrast, included Egypt among those countries that assist terrorists in Somalia.

Libya is far from Somalia and has no historical connection with Mogadishu. It seems to engage in controversial issues just because it does not want to be left out, especially since Somalia is a member of the Arab League, OIC, and AU. President Moammar Gadhafi invited the TFG and the Islamic Courts to send delegations to Tripoli in early September to celebrate the 7th anniversary of the AU. The Courts sent their top leaders while the TFG ambassador to Libya represented it. Gadhafi apparently hoped to broker an agreement between them. It is not clear whether this effort was coordinated with the Khartoum peace process. In any event, it came to nothing and the TFG prime minister charged afterwards that Libya was blatantly interfering in the internal affairs of Somalia by providing arms and cash to the Islamic Courts.

Gulf States and Iran

Located across the Gulf of Aden from Somaliland and Somalia, Yemen has a significant interest in a peaceful Somalia, which is Yemen's largest trading partner among member countries of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. There are 84,000 registered Somali refugees in Yemen and untold others who are not registered. During the September to April sailing season, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates about 100 persons, mostly Somalis, arrive each day in Yemen by boat. Many die during the crossing. The UN Monitoring Group on Somalia reported that Yemen sent in January 2006 fifteen pickup trucks and military clothing to the TFG. Yemen acknowledged the shipment, but said the items were for the police. The US assistant secretary of state for African affairs told a congressional hearing in June that money was moving from Yemen to the Islamic Courts. Yemen's foreign minister denied that his government provided any aid to the Courts. He added that "stability cannot be achieved through taking sides with the Islamic Courts or the legitimate government" and said it could only be reached through dialogue between the Courts and the TFG.

Saudi Arabia is important for two primary reasons. It traditionally was the principal importer of Somalia's major export—livestock—and money from Saudi Arabia has in recent years supported in Somalia an intolerant creed of Islam known as Wahhabism. The livestock ban has been particularly harmful and applied to most of the region since an outbreak of Rift Valley Fever in 1997. The UN reported in 1998 that the outbreak in southern Somalia had ended, but Saudi Arabia continues to maintain the ban for Somalia. Most Somalis believe the ban continues for either political reasons or because of Saudi economic interests. A solution to the problem, either a system that verifies the animals are disease free and/or pressure on the government of Saudi Arabia to accept Somali livestock, would do much to help restore Somalia's economy.

Islamic charities funded by Saudi Arabia such as al-Haramain were once active in Somalia until they were linked to terrorist activity and shut down by the Saudi government. Funds from private Saudi sources probably continue to support fundamentalist activity in Somalia. The UN Monitoring Group on Somalia reported that Saudi Arabia provided military uniforms to the TFG in December 2005. Saudi Arabia confirmed a shipment of medical equipment, medicine and anti-gas protective clothing. The US assistant secretary of state for African affairs commented in June that money from Saudi Arabia, although not necessarily the government, was going to the Islamic Courts. This resulted in a sharp denial from the Saudi crown prince, who said there was no funding going from the kingdom to the Courts.

The United Arab Emirates has become the financial center for Somali businesspersons. Somali airlines, shipping, money transfer, telecommunications, and general trading companies have their headquarters in Dubai. Following the outbreak of piracy along the Somali coast, the Somali Business Association in Dubai decided to deploy its own armed security force to protect cargo vessels visiting Somali ports from the UAE. Qatar also showed increased interest in Somalia when the emir invited the chairman of the executive council of Islamic Courts for talks in late September.

Shiite Iran has never shown a great deal of interest in Sunni Somalia. This may be changing. Perhaps buoyed by the success of Iranian-supported Hezbollah in Lebanon and growing relations with Iraq, Iran's leaders may have concluded they should pay more attention to the Horn of Africa and especially the rising Islamic movement in Somalia. Following a visit to Iran in September by the president of Djibouti, the Iranian president released a communiqué that supported the Khartoum peace process and questioned the wisdom of sending any peacekeeping force to Somalia. The prime minister of the TFG had earlier accused Iran of providing arms to terrorists in Somalia.

Implications for US Policy in the Region: Some General Considerations

US influence with countries in the region that are involved in Somalia varies from considerable (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Egypt) to very little in nations like Iran, Sudan, Eritrea, and Libya. Even in those countries where the influence is considerable, numerous other issues, many of them more important to the US than Somalia, limit the degree to which the US is prepared to use its leverage to encourage a different policy towards Somalia. Cooperation on counterterrorism, US military basing or access, support for US policy in the Middle East, and limiting nuclear proliferation, among others, will almost always trump US policy towards Somalia. The policy suggestions discussed below are only meaningful when considered in the context of these other issues.

US policy towards Somalia after the departure of US troops in 1994 was largely one of disinterest except when it stepped forward to provide emergency assistance, mostly food aid, during natural disasters. The US always responded effectively to these calamities. Following 9/11, US policy towards Somalia has focused almost exclusively on counterterrorism while continuing to respond to natural disasters. Although it may finally be in the process of developing a comprehensive policy towards Somalia, twelve years passed without such a policy.

Any policy based exclusively on countering terrorism and the provision of emergency assistance in times of need will fail to deal with the complex situation that exists in Somalia.

As a general principle, the US should support the reconciliation process underway in Khartoum between the TFG and the Islamic Courts. The next session is scheduled for October 30. There is no guarantee these talks will succeed, but they offer at least the possibility of a peaceful agreement between the TFG and the Islamic Courts. Prospects are high that any agreement will result in some kind of Islamic government. Somalia is almost entirely Muslim, however, and such a development would not be the first time the US has had reasonably cordial relations with a government that is Islamic by definition. Only if it appears that the Khartoum talks reach a dead end should the US consider a different approach. For the time being, the US should encourage other parties in the region to pursue a similar policy. As a corollary to this suggestion, the US should engage directly the moderate members of the Islamic Courts. Current US policy on the Khartoum talks and dialogue with elements of the Islamic Courts seem ambiguous.

As the talks in Khartoum play out, the US should make a greater effort, together with the rest of the donor community, to enhance development and improve living conditions for average Somalis. Progress in this arena will tend to moderate the views of Somalis and perhaps reduce the ability of the most extreme members of the Islamic Courts to increase their influence. The US has done well by providing this year to Somalia more than \$90 million in emergency assistance, mostly food aid following a serious drought. Its development assistance to both Somalia and Somaliland is running at a paltry \$2 to \$3 million annually. It should increase foreign assistance, working through international and nongovernmental organizations, to both Somalia and Somaliland.

It is difficult to comprehend what useful purpose would be achieved at this point by an AU peacekeeping force in Somalia. The TFG, which probably sees such a force as keeping it in power, strongly favors the proposal. The Islamic Courts adamantly oppose the force and say they will counter it militarily. The AU endorsed in September an 8,000-strong regional peacekeeping force for Somalia. The stated aim of the mission, to be known as IGASOM, is to contribute to building the capacity of institutions and to promote dialogue and reconciliation in the country. With a vow by the Courts to attack the force, it is hard to see how this contributes to dialogue and reconciliation. The AU has subcontracted creation of the force to IGAD, which is itself divided on the matter. Establishment of such a force may be moot as only one IGAD-member country, Uganda, has said it will contribute troops and then reportedly only if there is peace in Somalia. The proposed force is also hampered by the existing UN arms embargo in Somalia and lack of a commitment by any organization or countries to pay for the operation, estimated to cost \$34 million a month. Even if there eventually is a peacekeeping mission to Somalia, it will probably have little chance of success.

A number of countries are supplying arms to one or more party in Somalia. The US should work across the board to end this flow but without singling out any particular supplier. Because the US has greater leverage, for example, with a country like Ethiopia than Eritrea, there may be an inclination to focus on Ethiopia. It would be unfair, however, to put pressure on Ethiopia to end its supply of arms to the TFG while ignoring Eritrea's provision of arms to the

Islamic Courts. Unfortunately, Somalia is already awash in arms. Ending the supply would not have a significant impact for years to come except in the case of ammunition, which does periodically run low.

One policy suggestion falls in the lesson learned department. There is strong evidence that persons passing through Somalia and perhaps taking refuge there were involved in the 1998 terrorist attacks against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. There is similar evidence of links to the attacks against Israeli interests in Mombasa in 2002. The US had legitimate concerns about the role of certain Somalis in support of terrorism. There have been numerous reports that the US provided beginning early this year financial assistance to the Alliance for Peace Restoration and Combat Against Terror (APRCT), which consisted of various warlords in the greater Mogadishu area. The US neither confirmed nor denied these reports. Apparent US support for APRCT was not, however, the way to solve the problem and only had the effect of enhancing the power of the Islamic Courts. The warlords had lost the respect of most Somalis and almost certainly used the funding to further their own agendas rather than that of the US. Even if they had succeeded in capturing a few terrorists, the situation in Mogadishu would have remained chaotic. The US should focus on funding development, legitimate peace processes, and accepted institutions rather than subcontract with unreliable Somali factions to catch illusive terrorists. The return of law and order and a functioning economy and government is much more likely to reign in support for terrorists.

Some Country Specific Policy Suggestions for the US

If you accept the argument that the presence of Ethiopian troops in Somalia will incite Somali nationalism and lead to even greater instability in the region, then it is in the interest of US policy to caution Ethiopia to keep its troops out of Somalia. Ethiopia does have legitimate security concerns about developments in Somalia and certainly has the right to protect its border. In the event it is attacked by groups coming from Somalia, most countries will probably look the other way if Ethiopia engages across the border in hot pursuit. The sending of Ethiopian troops into Somalia for other purposes, however, is not in the interest of regional stability and hence not in the interest of the US.

Kenya has aligned itself with Ethiopia in support of the TFG, but has not sent troops into Somalia nor apparently has it provided arms to any party. By taking this action and supporting a regional peacekeeping mission for Somalia, however, Kenya may have undercut its ability to influence the dialogue between the TFG and the Islamic Courts. Kenya should be encouraged to support the Khartoum talks for as long as they appear to have any chance of success. Many Kenyans resented US financial support for the warlords in Mogadishu rather than support of the TFG. Many also believe that the US bypassed Nairobi in the aftermath of the Islamic Courts' victory over the warlords. Kenya was not invited to join the US-created Contact Group on Somalia. In the meantime, more Somali refugees are crossing from Somalia to Kenya, adding to its problems. Clearly, a more intense US-Kenya dialogue on Somalia is in order.

Djibouti's position on Somalia is a reasonable one so long as there is any life left in the Khartoum talks. For the time being, the US only needs to continue routine consultation with Djibouti on Somalia. The only American military base—Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of

Africa (CJTF-HOA)—in sub-Saharan Africa is located in Djibouti. If the US and Djibouti view Somalia similarly, it will facilitate the CJTF-HOA part of the relationship. Should the talks in Khartoum breakdown, then it will be necessary to reassess the content of the dialogue with Djibouti on Somalia.

US influence in Khartoum and Asmara is so limited that it is not clear discussions in these capitals on Somalia will lead anywhere, especially when the US has more pressing issues with both countries. The US is more concerned about implementation of the Darfur Peace Agreement and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan while Eritrea's relations with Ethiopia are the major issue in Asmara. On the other hand, Khartoum may be a good location for contact between the US and the Islamic Courts. If US policy concludes that success at the negotiations in Khartoum is the best way to proceed, then Somalia becomes an issue where there is partial agreement with Sudan and Eritrea. The US should encourage Uganda to hold back any thought of deploying peacekeeping troops to Somalia unless it becomes clear the Khartoum process has failed. Even then, there should be a careful assessment as to the advisability of such a peacekeeping mission.

The high level US agenda with Egypt is probably too full to include Somalia, but this is an issue where views need to be exchanged at mid-levels. One should never underestimate the influence of Egypt in the Horn of Africa. Egypt has close ties to the North Africans, Gulf States, and Sudan, all of whom can contribute to a solution or worsening of the situation in Somalia. The US learned during its military intervention in Somalia (UNITAF) in the early 1990s that it ignored Egypt at its peril. Although Libya may not be a serious player in Somalia, it always has the potential to complicate an issue. The US diplomatic presence in Tripoli should be used to help ensure that Libya is making a positive contribution to resolving the Somali problem.

The US should engage Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in a dialogue on Somalia. They all have influence, especially with the Islamic Courts. They also have a voice in the Arab League and OIC. In the case of Saudi Arabia, there should be a renewed effort to determine if there can be a solution to the vexing Saudi ban on livestock from Somalia and other countries in the region. An improved economic situation in the country should help to minimize tendencies by Somalis to support extremists on the Islamic Courts.

It appears that the US has become more engaged with Somalia in a positive way since the defeat of the warlords in Mogadishu earlier this past summer by the Islamic Courts. The US lost more than a decade getting to this point. The situation in Somalia is too important for US interests in the wider region to return to a policy of indifference.