



COMMENTARY

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Fading Hopes for Somalia Crisis

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Hopes for a peaceful political resolution to the crisis in Somalia are dimming, as a power struggle between the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and clan-based and Islamist militias continues to wrack Mogadishu.

A brutal crackdown by Ethiopian and Somali government troops in early May has done little to end an incipient insurgency, and disaffected clan militias and remnants of the vanquished Islamic Courts Union (ICU) have resorted to increasingly guerrilla-like tactics, including suicide bombings and a series of remote-controlled car bombs detonated in the last several weeks.

An African Union peacekeeping force—initially envisaged as a multinational 8,000-strong deployment, but currently comprising only 1,400 Ugandan troops—has been largely ineffective, predictably so, since it deployed into a chaotic, anarchic situation, with no clear mandate and no real peace to keep. Four Ugandan soldiers have been killed to date, and other African countries, which initially expressed some interest in contributing troops, appear increasingly reluctant to send their personnel into a sharply deteriorating security environment.

The TFG, which is internally divided and deeply unpopular in Mogadishu, has failed to take the necessary measures to broaden its support base and expand the governing coalition. A national reconciliation conference has been postponed twice and is now slated for June 15. Rather than seizing the opportunity early on in its tenure to reach out in a genuine way to disaffected groups and moderate remnants of the Islamic Courts Union, the TFG has instead chosen to rely on Ethiopian military force and the support of the international community to consolidate its position in Mogadishu. This is not a sustainable tack: Ethiopia will not remain in Mogadishu indefinitely: it is taking hits in Somalia, it has been accused by human rights groups of perpetrating war crimes, and it cannot long sustain a costly occupation given other domestic and regional security preoccupations. Further, having achieved its immediate objective of dispersing an increasing radicalized ICU leadership, it has much less compelling interest in the long hard slog of building Somali governing institutions or pushing the TFG to expand its base.

This task will likely fall to the broader international community. There is a risk that international attention will move on from Somalia; the world has lived with a chaotic vacuum in that country for 14 years. But for humanitarian reasons, for the stability of the region, and for the long-term fight to curb international terror, this would be a mistake. The conditions that led to the rise of the ICU's more radical leadership remain intact, and the possibility that those elements regroup, bolstered by external funding, is real.

The United States has a particular responsibility in Somalia: a narrow U.S. focus on counter-terror imperatives has contributed to the current impasse. The United States secretly funded an alliance of

unpopular warlords in 2005-2006 to root out al-Qaeda affiliates allegedly sheltered by the Islamic courts, a move that may ultimately have helped unify and empower the more radical elements of the ICU. The ICU's defeat of these warlords in spring of 2006 added to the union's popularity and legitimacy, as they established a modicum of security and basic services in Mogadishu for the first time in over a decade.

Further, U.S. air strikes against fleeing ICU leaders and al Qaeda suspects in southern Somalia, with cooperation from Ethiopia, have led to the widespread perception (both in Somalia and Ethiopia) that the United States fully endorsed and supported the Ethiopian invasion and subsequent occupation. In January, the United States knowingly allowed Ethiopia to secretly purchase arms from North Korea in violation of UN sanctions that the U.S. had been instrumental in passing. Human rights groups have accused the United States of cooperating with Ethiopia, Kenya, and the TFG in a secret detention program for individuals fleeing Somalia, with U.S. intelligence agents interrogating detainees in Kenya, who were denied access to legal counsel and consular representatives. All these factors will make it difficult for the United States to disentangle itself, in perception and fact, from Ethiopian policy, which is a source of deep resentment among many Somalis.

The appointment on May 17 of retired ambassador John Yates as Special Envoy to Somalia is a positive step. But it comes late in the game, as U.S. leverage in the situation declines. Congress should revisit legislation on U.S. engagement in Somalia to ensure that the administration remains adequately seized with the current crisis and the need for a longer-term comprehensive approach.

The U.S. strategy now should be to put forward in no uncertain terms a set of expectations and benchmarks for the TFG, in terms of reconciliation, inclusivity, power-sharing, and humanitarian access, backed by a credible package of incentives and pressures. Unqualified support for the TFG will only reinforce their current approach, and U.S. assistance should be more stringently conditioned on demonstrable progress. The reconciliation conference slated for June 15 will be one benchmark, but the process will need to be more enduring and pervasive than a one-off public conference, which at this point appears unlikely to succeed.

The U.S. also needs to prepare for the possibility that the reconciliation process is not credible and that the situation in Mogadishu deteriorates further. In that case, it will need to look beyond the TFG to identify Somali partners within civil society with whom it can engage in revitalizing basic governing structures and strengthening basic services like education and health.

The U.S. should also distance itself from the perceived strategic alliance with Ethiopia (which is damaging to U.S. credibility both in Somalia and more broadly in Africa), and should push Ethiopia to use its considerable leverage to move the TFG toward genuine powersharing. The U.S. should work with the international community and regional states on building a comprehensive approach toward Somalia that goes beyond narrow counter-terrorism concerns.

The outcome of the struggle in Somalia will hinge on a political solution, and at present, the onus is on the TFG to create a credible process. It will also require that those excluded groups engage in that process (if indeed it is credible), that hard-core spoilers are sidelined, and that damage by those groups who have learned to profit from continuing chaos is minimized. The United State should use its dwindling leverage toward these ends.

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