

## ***Somalia as a Military Target***

By Stephen Zunes

The east African nation of Somalia is being mentioned with increasing frequency as a possible next target in the U.S.-led war against international terrorism. Somalia is a failed state—with what passes for the central government controlling little more than a section of the national capital of Mogadishu, a separatist government in the north, and rival warlords and clan leaders controlling most the remainder of the country. U.S. officials believe that cells of the Al-Qaeda terrorist network may have taken advantage of the absence of governmental authority to set up operation.

Before the U.S. attacks that impoverished country, however, it is important to recognize how Somalia became a possible haven for the followers of Osama bin Laden and what might result if America goes to war.

### **A Cold War Pawn**

As one of the most homogeneous countries in Africa, many would have not predicted the chronic instability and violent divisions that have gripped Somalia in recent years. During the early 1970s, Somalia was a client of the Soviet Union, even allowing the Soviets to establish a naval base at Berbera on the strategic north coast near the entrance to the Red Sea. Somali dictator Siad Barre established this relationship in response to the large-scale American military support of Somalia's historic rival Ethiopia, then under the rule of the feudal emperor Haile Selassie. When a military coup by leftist Ethiopian officers toppled the monarchy in 1974 and declared the country a Marxist-Leninist state the following year, the superpowers switched their allegiances—with the Soviet Union backing Ethiopia and the United States siding with the Barre regime in Somalia.

In 1977, Somalia attacked the Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia in an effort to incorporate the area's ethnic Somali population. The Ethiopians were eventually able to repel the attack with large-scale Soviet military support and 20,000 Cuban troops. Zbigniew Brzezinski, then-National Security Adviser under President Jimmy Carter, has since claimed that the conflict in this remote desert region was what sparked the end of detente with the Soviet Union and the renewal of the cold war.

From the late 1970s until just before his overthrow in early 1991, the U.S. sent hundreds of millions of dollars of arms to the Barre regime in return for the use of military facilities that had been originally constructed for the Soviets. These bases were to be used to support U.S. military intervention in the Middle East. The U.S. government ignored warnings throughout the 1980s by Africa specialists, human rights groups, and humanitarian organizations that continued U.S. support of the dictatorial Barre government would eventually plunge Somalia into chaos.

These predictions proved tragically accurate. During the nearly fifteen years of support by the U.S. and Italy, thousands of civilians were massacred at the hands of Barre's increasingly authoritarian regime. Full-scale civil war erupted in 1988 and the repression increased still further, with clan leaders in the northern third of the country declaring independence to escape the persecution. In greatly centralizing his government's control, Barre severely weakened traditional structures in Somali society that had kept civil order for many years. To help maintain his grip on power, Barre played different Somali clans against each other, sowing the seeds of the fratricidal chaos and mass starvation to come.

Meanwhile, by eliminating all potential rivals with a national following, a power vacuum was

created that could not be filled when the regime was finally overthrown in January 1991, barely noticed outside the country as world attention was focused upon the start of the Gulf War. With the end of the cold war and with the U.S. granted new bases in the Persian Gulf countries, Somalia fell off the radar screen of U.S. foreign policy.

There is widespread understanding among those familiar with Somalia that had the U.S. government not supported the Barre regime with large amounts of military aid, he would have been forced to step down long before his misrule splintered the country. Prior to the dictator's downfall, former U.S. Representative Howard Wolpe, then-chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, called on the State Department to encourage Barre to step down. His pleas were rejected. "What you are seeing," observed the congressman and former professor of African politics, "is a general indifference to a disaster that we played a role in creating."

A U.S. diplomat who had been stationed in the Somali capital of Mogadishu acknowledged, "It's easy to blame us for all this." But, he argued, "This is a sovereign country we're taking about. They have chosen to spend [U.S. military aid] that way, to hurt people and destroy their own economy."

As the U.S. poured in more than \$50 million of arms annually to prop up the Barre regime, there was virtually no assistance offered that could help build a self-sustaining economy that could feed Somalia's people. In addition, the U.S. pushed a structural adjustment program through the International Monetary Fund that severely weakened the local agricultural economy. Combined with the breakdown of the central govern-

ment, drought conditions, and rival militias disrupting food supplies, there was famine on a massive scale, resulting in the deaths of more than 300,000 Somalis, mostly children.

## Humanitarian Mission Goes Awry

In November 1992, the outgoing Bush administration sent 30,000 U.S. troops—primarily Marines and Army Rangers—to Somalia, in what was described as a humanitarian mission to assist in the distribution of relief supplies that were being intercepted by armed militias without reaching the civilian populations in need. The United Nations Security Council endorsed the initiative the following month.

Many Somalis and some relief organizations were grateful for the American role. Many others expressed skepticism, noting that the famine had actually peaked that summer and the security situation was also gradually improving. As U.S. troops began arriving, the chaos limiting food shipments was constrained to a small area, with most other parts of the country functioning as relatively peaceful fiefdoms. Most food was getting through and the loss from theft was only slightly higher than elsewhere in Africa. In some cases, U.S. forces essentially dumped food on local markets, hurting indigenous farmers and creating greater food shortages over the longer term. In any case, few Somalis were involved in the decisions during this crucial period.

Most importantly for the U.S., large numbers of Somalis saw the American forces as representatives of the government that had been the major outside supporter of the hated former dictatorship. Such a foreign presence in a country that had been

free from colonial rule for only a little more than three decades led to growing resentment. Contributing to these concerns was the fact that the U.S. troops arriving in Somalia were elite combat forces, and were not trained for such humanitarian missions. (Author and journalist David Halberstrom quotes the U.S. Defense Secretary telling an associate, "We're sending the Rangers to Somalia. We are not going to be able to control them. They are like overtrained pit bulls. No one controls them.") Shootings at U.S. military roadblocks became increasingly commonplace, and Somalis witnessed scenes of mostly white American forces harassing and shooting black countrymen.

In addition, the U.S. role escalated to include attempts at disarming some of the warlords, resulting in armed engagements, often in crowded urban neighborhoods. This "mission creep" resulted in American casualties, creating growing dissent at home in what had originally been a widely supported foreign policy initiative. The thousands of M-16 rifles sent, courtesy of the American taxpayer, to Barre's armed forces were now in the hands of rival militiamen who had not only used them to kill their fellow countrymen and to disrupt the distribution of relief supplies, but were now using them against American troops. Within the U.S. ranks, soldiers were heard repeating the slogan, "The only good Somali is a dead Somali." It had become apparent that the U.S. had badly underestimated the resistance.

In May 1993, the U.S. transferred the failing mission to the UN. This was the first time the world body had combined peacekeeping, peace enforcement, and humanitarian assistance, as well as the first time the UN had intervened without a formal invitation by a host government (because

there wasn't any.) Within Somalia there was little trust of the United Nations, particularly since the UN Secretary General at that time was Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a major supporter of Barre when he led Egypt's foreign ministry.

Even though the UN was technically in control, U.S. forces went on increasingly aggressive forays, including a major battle in Mogadishu that resulted in the deaths of 18 Marines and hundreds of Somali civilians, dramatized in the highly fictionalized thriller *Black Hawk Down*. The U.S.-led UN forces had become yet another faction in the multisided conflict. Largely retreating to fixed position, the primary American mission soon became protecting its own forces. With mounting criticism on Capitol Hill from both the left and the right, President Bill Clinton withdrew American troops in March 1994. The UN took its last peacekeeping forces out one year later.

The U.S. intervention in Somalia is now widely considered to have been a fiasco. It is largely responsible for the subsequent U.S. hesitation around such so-called humanitarian intervention (outside of high-altitude bombing.) It was the major factor in the tragic U.S. refusal to intervene—

either unilaterally or through the UN—to prevent the genocide in Rwanda during the spring of 1994.

## The Coming Debacle

Most likely, the Somalia intervention was another ill-advised assertion of well-meaning liberal internationalism in U.S. foreign policy. But there may have been other factors prompting the American decision to intervene as well: perhaps as a rationalization for increased military spending despite the end of the cold war, perhaps as an effort to mollify the Islamic world for American overkill in the war against Iraq and the inaction against the massacres of Muslims in Bosnia, and/or perhaps as a preemptive operation against possible Islamic extremists rising out of the chaos. If the latter was the goal, it may have backfired. Islamic radicals were able to find some willing recruits among the Somalis, already upset by the U.S. support for Barre, now with additional anger at the impact of direct U.S. military intervention in their country.

In subsequent years, there has been only marginal progress toward establishing any kind of widely recognized national government. Somalia is still divided into fiefdoms run by clan

leaders and warlords, though there is rarely any serious fighting. Some officials in the current Bush administration believe that Al-Qaeda has established an important network of cells within this factious country.

If this is indeed the case, it begs the question as to how the U.S. should respond. It is possible that U.S. forces could obtain highly accurate intelligence that would allow them to pinpoint and take out the cells without once again becoming embroiled in messy urban counterinsurgency warfare, like that of 1993-94, or relying on air strikes in heavily populated areas, resulting in large-scale civilian casualties. Based on recent history, however, this is rather doubtful. The result of renewed U.S. military intervention in Somalia, then, could be yet another debacle that would only encourage the extremist forces America is trying to destroy.

*(Stephen Zunes  
<stephen@coho.org> is a senior analyst with Foreign Policy In Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)) and associate professor of Politics and chair of the Peace & Justice Studies Program at the University of San Francisco.)*

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