

## ***Somalia At Crossroads of American Foreign Policy***

By Ken Menkhaus

Somalia and the U.S. are apparently doomed by fate to collide at critical moments in global politics. The collision has never brought anything but trouble to both parties. We are about to crash into one another again, this time in an expanded war on terrorism.

It was Somalia that attacked Ethiopia in 1977, triggering a series of Soviet moves that led to the end of détente between the superpowers and the rise of "Cold War II." Détente, it was said, was buried in the sands of the Ogaden Desert.

Somalia was also the graveyard of the new world order. In December 1992, hoping to set a precedent for more robust principles of humanitarian interventionism, the United States chose Somalia as the site of a major peace operation to put a halt to its famine, warlordism, and anarchy. Instead of setting a precedent for humanitarian intervention and post-cold war peace enforcement, events in Somalia nearly destroyed the credibility of UN peacekeeping and ruined the American appetite for international humanitarian operations and nation-building exercises. In the years that followed, the U.S. grew cautious about peace operations, cynical toward multilateralism and the UN, and indifferent toward failed states in the Third World. As for Somalia, our punishment for its impertinence was to pretend it didn't exist.

But a decade later, the seemingly inconsequential country of Somalia appears destined yet again to play a major role in American foreign policy. This time, Somalia, which is near the top of the list of our next targets for military action, may become the litmus test for how we define and execute an expanded war on terrorism.

What could go wrong in Somalia? Plenty, particularly if we intervene without adequate

knowledge of the country's complex politics. One of the costs of ignoring Somalia since 1994 is that we are now caught trying to formulate policy about a country we know virtually nothing about. When information is bad, analysis and policy are likely to be flawed as well. American policymakers need a few important correctives that can prevent our policy on Somalia from descending into a repeat of the debacle of the early nineties.

First, Somalia's Islamist movement, Al-Ittihad, is not synonymous with Al-Qaeda, and media insinuations to the contrary are wildly wrong. Al-Ittihad is a small, relatively weak organization, with a mainly domestic agenda. Some individual members have had links to Al-Qaeda that merit close scrutiny, but the group as a whole is in no way a subsidiary of Al-Qaeda.

Second, Somalia's Transitional National Government (TNG) is not a front for al-Ittihad, and is not the Somali equivalent of the Taliban government. It is extremely weak, controlling only half of the city of Mogadishu, and while it has some Al-Ittihad members in its parliament, it is by no means a front for violent Islamists.

Third, Somalia does not currently harbor active terrorist bases and camps. Somalia's Al-Ittihad movement abandoned the few towns and rural outposts it once controlled, and has since integrated into local communities as teachers, health workers, and businessmen. Bombing abandoned outposts would be a pointless exercise in rearranging rocks.

Finally, Somalia is not a likely safe haven for fleeing Al-Qaeda members. Concern about Somalia as a terrorist refuge is understandable. It is a collapsed state with no functional central government; global outlaws there could presumably escape the reach of law. In reality, however, Somalia is a lousy hideout for non-Somali

radicals. Foreigners cannot operate in secrecy in Somalia; everyone knows who you are and what you're doing, and locals would not hesitate to expose the presence of non-Somalis in their midst.

What does all this mean for an expanded war on terrorism in Somalia? It suggests that the only military action that might be appropriate in Somalia is a limited operation of capturing one or several major suspects. Chasing down minor players in the armed, clannish neighborhoods

of Mogadishu would be dangerous and counterproductive.

Ideally, U.S. policy toward Somalia should be a combination of close monitoring, surveillance, and naval interdiction—which we are already doing—as well as constructive engagement with Somalia's many local and regional authorities. Somalis are above all else pragmatists, and if presented with the right combination of carrots and sticks—and if treated with respect—will work with us in the war on terrorism. Threatening military moves are not

likely to achieve that goal. U.S. policy in Somalia will shed light on whether the war on terrorism is an essentially military campaign, or if we are clever and patient enough as a country to draw on the many tools in our toolbox besides the hammer.

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