

A New Frontier of *Jihadi* Islam?

By Najum Mushtaq | July 25, 2006

Somalia today is very much like Afghanistan was in 1996. In the wake of years of civil war, chaotic rule by warlords, and the death and displacement of countless Muslims, a ragtag Islamic militia has moved in to take control of much of Somalia.

After running off some prominent warlords from their entrenched strongholds, the Islamic militia has sought to establish and expand its writ and has threatened to dislodge an internationally backed transitional government made up of veteran warlords with limited authority. Businessmen, clan leaders, and the general public, having tired of seemingly interminable factional violence and lawlessness, have lent support to the al-Qaida-aligned, fiercely anti-American Islamic militia, which draws legitimacy from its plans to restore peace and order. The militia has purported to do so by enforcing a court system based on an ultra-orthodox version of the Sharia (Islamic law) and tribal social norms.

The parallels between the predicaments of Somalia today and Afghanistan in 1996 are striking. Unless neighboring countries and the international community take this “Afghanistan” scenario seriously, Somalia will become the next frontier of *jihadi* Islam. Unless the United States changes its policy of funding an anti-terrorism alliance of Somali warlords, it will face a second Taliban. And unless Ethiopia rethinks its July 20 military intervention to prop up the transitional government against the Islamic Courts, Sunni Muslim sentiment in Somalia will turn even more radical.

Taliban-II?

Many analysts underestimate or simply dismiss the potential of Somalia becoming the Afghanistan of Africa. The Somali tradition of “religious moderation and tolerance” is cited as a deterrent to a Taliban-like, medieval administration that could destabilize the region and provide support for militant Islamic movements worldwide. For instance, in his July 11 testimony

before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia David Shinn noted that the rise of Islamic militias “does not mean, however, that Somalia is likely to become a major al-Qaida base or that it is headed toward a Taliban form of government. The vast majority of Somalis follow a moderate form of Islam and they are highly suspicious of foreign influence.”

An International Crisis Group report says that “Somalis in general show little interest in *jihadi* Islamism; most are deeply opposed. Somali militant movements have failed to gain broad popular support, encountering instead widespread hostility. The most remarkable feature is that Islamist militancy has not become more firmly rooted in what should, by most conventional assessments, be fertile ground.”

Still others point to the diversity of Somalia. The Islamic courts, Somalia observers say, have yet to venture into areas outside the Hawiye belt and, even within this clan, ideological and intra-clan differences are sharp. Some of the Islamic courts and Islamic leaders are seen to be more moderate than others. It remains to be seen if their radical Islamic rhetoric can keep the disparate Union of Islamic Courts united. Conventional Somali wisdom says clan affiliation comes before anything else.

Yet a look at Somalia’s recent history, the events of the past few months, and the geo-strategic context in which the Islamic courts have gained ground all point to a more ominous future.



The Rise of the Courts

Since the fall of General Siyaad Barre's military regime in 1991, Somalia has been at war with itself, fragmented and carved up by warlords and clan-based militias, and without central rule. No less than fourteen attempts to restore statehood through internationally brokered national governments have failed to bring order or stem the violence. The Barre government had suppressed the Islamic movements of all hues for over twenty years. In the political vacuum and power struggle that ensued after Barre's fall, militant Islamic movements resurfaced with a vengeance, working on all fronts ranging from commerce to the judiciary. Islamic leaders had first earned legitimacy by assuming and effectively administering court functions in lawless areas in the greater Mogadishu region. These clan-based courts also kept militias and have since been major players in internecine fighting.

After a successful campaign earlier this year against the pro-U.S. warlords in the capital city, militias of the Islamic Courts now have direct control of Mogadishu's sixteen districts and three other strategic regions in Somalia's heartland and are looking to forge alliances in others. New Islamic courts are being established in areas under the nominal control of the internationally backed transitional government. The government's own militia-men are joining the courts—as they did recently in Buur Hakaba, in the Bey region. Despite inner wrangling for power, the Union of Islamic Courts has made a bid to speak with one voice to the international community and in negotiations with the warlord-led transitional government. In terms of manpower and weaponry the militias are as formidable as any other factional force in the country. And unlike the warlords, the Islamic militia seems to enjoy popular legitimacy. In addition to offering the prospect of peace after relentless bloodshed, the Islamic movement derives much of its legitimacy from its anti-American stance. Like the Taliban, the tone and tenor of the victorious Islamic Courts in Mogadishu evince a religious self-righteousness that, when translated into political power, will have implications far beyond the immediate local Somali context.

In his first interview after taking over Mogadishu, Shaykh Sharif Ahmed, one of the founding leaders of the

Supreme Council of Islamic Courts, told the UN news agency IRIN: "I think it is the American government that is against the Somali people. It is they who attacked the Somali people. It is the U.S. government that gave a lot of money to fund the faction leaders ... We believe that the American government was responsible for the fighting. It is the Americans who are against the Somali people. We are not against them." Al-Qaida, court leaders say, is a figment of the American imagination.

However, in areas already under the Islamic Courts' control, a process of consolidation of power is underway. Sharia laws and a Taliban-like code of public behavior are in force. Although almost all Somalis follow the more tolerant versions of Shaf'i school of thought, the surging Islamic movement in Somalia is a departure from the traditional structures of religion. Rather than being introverted and beholden to traditions, the movement is inspired by radical modern thinkers like Syed Qutab of Egypt and Maududi of Pakistan, both of whom had envisioned Sharia-based societies.

To complement the power of the Islamic courts there has been a phenomenal growth of charities, NGOs, and businesses with radical religious credentials. Islamic schools, where traditional religious texts and scriptures form the educational core, have filled the vacuum created by the devastation of the school system. Islamic movements dominate most of the universities and educational institutions. More than 300 Quranic schools in Somalia prepare indoctrinated clerics. Segregation of women, symbolized by the sweeping spread of the veil and the forceful advocacy of the Islamic code of conduct on modesty, seem irreversible trends. Many Somalis see it as an Islamic revolution that has been brewing for decades and has already Islamicized the culture and education system of Somalia.

The perceptions of a moderate, tolerant Islam in Somalia are far removed from a present reality shaped by internecine violence and the post-September 11 international environment. America's insistence on the al-Qaida connection may not be misplaced. Somalia could well be a refuge for some suspects in the Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam bombings. Hasan Daher Aweys, the new leader of the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts, is on America's list of supporters of terrorism. Osama bin Laden, too, has

claimed to have worked in tandem with the Somali militants. Like the Taliban toward Osama bin Laden, Mogadishu's Islamic courts also argue that any terrorist suspects in Somalia should be tried by local courts rather than extradited to other countries. And al-Qaida is certainly not a prime concern for the Somalis who seem willing to tolerate and even back a union of militant clerics in return for a semblance of stability and normalcy. For the people of Mogadishu and other regions, the terrorists they have known over the last decade and a half are the factional warlords and their forces from whom they have gained respite due to the Islamic courts. So far, other than the cornered warlords, public resistance to the rise of the Islamic courts has been conspicuous by its absence.

Regional Response

Direct and indirect involvement of regional actors in Somalia's civil war is another complication it shares with Afghanistan. The emergent power and popularity of the Islamic courts has evoked a hostile response from its neighbors, many of which have sizeable Muslim minorities. Ethiopia, a longstanding supporter of Abdullahi Yusuf, a warlord now leading the shaky transitional government in Bidoa, is wary of an Islamic administration in Mogadishu. Ethiopian worries are rooted in its troubled "Fifth Zone," a Somali-dominated Muslim region whose separatist movement has old ties with Somali Islamic movements. Ethiopian forces have conducted exercises on and, at times, inside the Somali border.

As Islamic leaders started to establish new courts in towns close to Bidoa, Ethiopian troops took over the town on July 20 to save the besieged transitional government. Ethiopia's military intervention then extended to the town of Wajid a few days later, and the people of Mogadishu were up in protest. A rally on July 22 to denounce Ethiopia captured the prevalent mood among Somali Muslims. The breakdown of Arab League-sponsored Khartoum talks and rigid policy positions of all sides make war a likely outcome of this standoff, unless Ethiopia withdraws its troops. The wave of radicalism among Somali Muslims will only gather force as the sentiment against foreign military intervention rises.

Kenya, burdened by more than 50,000 refugees, also has cause for concern. More bloodshed and violence, a likely outcome of the Islamic courts' ascendancy, will increase the flow of people across the border. The strong suspicion that al-Qaida fugitives implicated in the American embassy bombing of 2002 and other acts of terrorism in Kenya are in Somalia reinforces the perception of threat. Moreover, Kenya was a key actor in setting up the transitional government that the Islamic courts now threaten.

The Islamic-minded government in Khartoum, on the other hand, has on a number of occasions in the 1990s tried to unify the disparate religious movements of Somalia to form an Islamic emirate. After the Islamic courts took over Mogadishu in June 2006, Sudan also facilitated an agreement between the Islamic militia and the transitional government. With the Ethiopian military propping up its client warlord and by extension the transitional government, the agreement increasingly seems to be in jeopardy.

The U.S. Factor

To add to this complex, volatile, but clearly drawn-out regional scenario, U.S.-led coalition forces are anchored in Red Sea waters off Somalia, for the purpose of blocking off international Islamic networks' support systems. Though formally disengaged from the Somali conflict since the Black Hawk Down episode in 1993, the United States has been siding with the rivals of the Islamic militias—a policy pursued with more vigor since September 11. The rise of Islamic extremism in Somalia is a direct consequence of the desultory conduct of America's war on terrorism and its Somalia policy over the last two decades. In fact, the failed American attempt to influence the outcome of the civil war by funding an anti-terrorism alliance of unpopular warlords has left the Bush administration's ideological Somalia policy in shreds and further tarnished the U.S. image in Somalia. Washington insists on pursuing a multilateral process of negotiations and supporting the anti-Islamist transitional government. Realities in Somalia are changing but the American policy, defined by its anti-terrorism zeal and its antipathy to anything Islamic, will ultimately lead to a wider regional conflict, and perhaps at some later stage, direct confrontation. The nascent Supreme Council of the Islamic Courts

is therefore under severe constraints in terms of expanding its initial gains to the rest of Somalia.

Diplomatically Washington prefers engagement through the Somalia Contact Group, which also includes Norway, Britain, Sweden, Italy, Tanzania, and the European Union. (The African Union, the Arab League, a group of East African countries, and the United Nations have observer status.) The contact group supports the transitional government as “the legitimate framework for continued dialogue and the reestablishment of governance in Somalia leading to a successful transition to an elected, representative government at the end of the transitional period in 2009,” according to its July 18, 2006 joint communiqué. Given the pace of events, this attempt to artificially prop up transitional institutions will soon be redundant and already seems out of touch with ground realities in Somalia. Persisting with its policy of funding and openly backing discredited warlords has been and will remain counterproductive for the United States. At the same time, an aversion to Islamic rule and the terrorism connection will make it hard for the United States and the Contact Group in general to continue to accept the Islamic courts’ rule in Mogadishu and its expansion. Proxy wars, regional military conflicts, and a new pattern of Somalia’s fragmentation are in the cards.

However moderate and tolerant Somali Islam might have been in the past, the future bodes ill for Somalia.

It might eventually be irrelevant whether or not the Islamic forces succeed in setting up something resembling a nationwide state structure in Somalia. All over the Muslim world, militant Sharia movements have proved that they do not necessarily require formal state structures to recruit populations for militant causes and entrench themselves in society.

Again, the Taliban are a prime example. Since the defeat of the Taliban government in late 2001, the movement has gained new momentum and continues to inflict heavy damage. The Taliban ideology has virtually taken over the tribal areas of Pakistan and remains as potent within Afghanistan as ever. The Islamic courts of Somalia and the ideology they espouse are also here to stay. They have deepened the fissures within the larger Somali society, sharpened conflicts with regional powers, and stoutly defied America’s war on terrorism. With them a new era of *jihadi* Islam and violent confrontation in the horn of Africa has set in.

“Let what is on this side of the bank be washed out by the flood,” says the Somalia proverb, “and what is on that side of the bank carried away by the wind.” Caught between Islamic Courts on the one hand and the Ethiopian military on the other, Somalia indeed faces the twin plagues of flood and wind.

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