

“Developing a Coordinated and Sustainable US Strategy towards Somalia”

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Introduction

Senator Feingold, sub-committee chairman, and Senator Isakson, ranking member, I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion of US policy on Somalia. This hearing has been convened at a moment when Somalia is undergoing yet another dramatic political crisis, the latest in a long twenty year history of state collapse, warfare, and human suffering. Whatever the outcome of this latest round of fighting, Somalia will very likely remain a front-burner foreign policy challenge for the Obama administration.

We are very fortunate to have the experienced leadership of Ambassador Johnnie Carson, the new Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, at this time of crisis in Somalia. Ambassador Carson understands the intricacies of the Horn of Africa better than anyone in or out of the US government, possesses invaluable diplomatic experience in the region, and has the leadership skills to help forge and maintain inter-agency consensus which is essential for a coordinated US strategy toward Somalia. Ambassador Carson and his colleagues may face only poor options in Somalia, but I feel confident that the administration has assembled an excellent team on Africa policy.

Challenges

In recent years, the US and its regional and global allies have struggled to forge a coherent and effective strategy for Somalia. In part this has been a function of the uniquely complex problems associated with the Somali crisis, which has proven impervious to two decades of external efforts to bring an end to its state of collapse and armed conflict. As the crisis has lengthened, the difficulties have grown. Reliable information on which to build policy is scarce, a function of extraordinarily high levels of insecurity in the country. The resilience of internal spoilers has increased, while many of the country's most dedicated civic leaders and peace-builders have been silenced, killed, or forced to flee the country. External actors have created additional impasses by playing out proxy wars in Somalia, or funding jihadist violence. In this increasingly complex

environment, external statebuilding, peacebuilding, and counter-terrorism initiatives have at times been based on flawed analysis and have produced unintended consequences which have left Somalia and its regional neighbors even more insecure.

The US also faces the challenge of de-conflicting its multiple objectives in Somalia. Over the past decade, American counter-terrorism, state-building, and humanitarian initiatives have generally been un-integrated and have at times worked at cross-purposes.

The impact of the 2007-2008 Ethiopian military occupation of southern Somalia has created still more challenges for effective strategy. That occupation, and the destructive insurgency and counter-insurgency violence it triggered, helped to fuel an unprecedented level of radicalism in Somali society. Because the US is widely blamed by Somalis for backing the Ethiopian occupation, anti-Americanism has been very high in the country, and trust of American motives and policies low. This has been ameliorated somewhat by the January 2009 Ethiopian withdrawal, the establishment of a more broad-based transitional government, and Somali expectations of a shift in US policy under the Obama administration. But there is still a high level of mistrust of American policies and residual anger at the US that poses additional obstacles to effective strategies.

In addition, formulation of a coherent strategy toward Somalia is complicated by the fact that the Somali crisis is entangled in a regional conflict complex which includes the Ethiopian-Eritrean impasse, the insurgency and counter-insurgency in Ethiopia's Somali region, and the long-running tensions between Ethiopian and Somali security interests and territorial claims. Stand-alone strategies to deal with Somalia have been repeatedly undermined by these other regional dynamics.

Scenarios

A final challenge to creating an effective and coherent strategy is the fact that Somalia is currently in the midst of a major crisis which could result in one of several very different scenarios. The US government can and must prioritize its broad objectives and desired outcomes in Somalia, but in the face of considerable uncertainty about the political trajectory of the country in the weeks and months ahead, a fully developed country or regional strategy may be beyond reach.

At present, the UN-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) is under siege by a loose coalition of hard-line Islamist insurgencies, most notably *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* (the latter led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, a designated terror suspect). Several months ago, when Ethiopian forces departed and a new government in the TFG was formed featuring moderate Islamist leadership, there was real hope that *shabaab* was in trouble. It had thrived mainly as a resistance movement against Ethiopian occupation and the unpopular leadership of then TFG president Abdullahi Yusuf. With those two nemeses out of the picture, *shabaab* had much less appeal to Somalis, who find its radical application of sharia law, its desecration of sufi tombs, and its close links to Al Qaeda very disturbing. The hope was that Somali communities, clans, and factions would rally in support of the new TFG. But the TFG's ability to stand up a government has been

disappointing, and *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* have drawn on external support from al Qaeda, Eritrea, and other sources to launch an offensive that has captured strategic real estate in Mogadishu and southern Somalia and which threatens to drive the TFG out of the capital.

In coming weeks and months, one of several scenarios could emerge:

1. In a best-case outcome, the TFG will succeed in rallying support and pushing back the Islamist insurgency, negotiating with some insurgents and marginalizing or defeating the rest. This outcome would open the door to a US strategy privileging timely and well-targeted state-building support to the TFG as a means of consolidating those gains, and would produce improved security for delivery of badly needed humanitarian assistance.
2. In a worst-case outcome, the *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* defeat the TFG and take control over most or all of south-central Somalia and the capital. Because of *shabaab*'s ties to al Qaeda and the presence of foreign advisors and fighters in *shabaab*, this scenario promises to draw Ethiopian forces back into Somalia and will create pressure for the US to privilege counter-terrorism interventions into Somalia. Somalia could then become the site of regional or even globalized armed conflict.
3. An insurgency victory over the TFG could also produce a different outcome, one in which the two rival Islamist groups begin fighting among themselves. There are sharp tensions over leadership, ideology, foreign patronage, clan interests, and tactics between and within *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* and many Somalis anticipate a battle between them. Armed clashes pitting *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya* would present the US with no obvious protagonist to support, and would instead place emphasis on the need to avoid taking actions which would bring the two warring hardline groups together.
4. A final scenario is a reversion to status quo ante, in which no one side consolidates control over the country, which is left divided up into a variety of warring fiefdoms – some controlled by the TFG, others held by *shabaab*, *Hisbul Islamiyya*, clan militias, warlords, armed business groups, independent city-states, and others. This outcome would pose a major problem for US state-building initiatives and would tempt counter-terrorism operations to forge alliances with local non-state actors, as was the practice in years past. That policy came at some cost and was in many respects counter-productive, however, and would need careful scrutiny.

Toward a Somalia Strategy

I would like end my remarks by sharing several observations and recommendations toward the development of a Somalia strategy:

- In the short run, there is little the US can do to shape the outcome of the current fighting between Islamist insurgents and the TFG. This ball is in play, and while some timely financial support to the TFG could help shore it up, direct external

- military interventions are likely to play into the hands of *shabaab* and undermine rather than strengthen the credibility of the TFG.
- A regional rather than country-based strategy is more difficult to devise but ultimately more likely to bear fruit. This must include close scrutiny of the points of convergence and divergence in US interests and the interests of regional allies, and a willingness to address those points of divergence frankly.
 - US strategy in the region must harmonize to the maximum extent possible its counter-terrorism, state-building, and humanitarian objectives and programs. And harmonization must not come to be synonymous with counter-terrorism objectives simply subsuming other policies.
 - US strategy must be informed by more accurate, nuanced assessment of both Somali actors and foreign interests in the country. Oversimplified analyses have at times led to serious errors by external actors. The fact that Somalia is a very complex crisis is not a license to simplify, it is an obligation to take the time to understand.
 - The US currently enjoys a good position in the Somali political debate. We support the moderate Islamist governance of the TFG, a broad-based and inclusive government coalition, a negotiated end to the current fighting, an end to foreign interference in Somalia's internal affairs, peaceful co-existence with regional neighbors, and peace. These are very much shared values with the vast majority of Somali people. By contrast, Al Qaeda is urging Somalis to kill one another in the name of a radical, Wahhabist interpretation of Islam, and because the current government is too willing to seek co-existence with Ethiopia and the West. Al Qaeda's position is quite unpopular with Somalis, who deeply resent foreigners imposing their ideological wars on the Somali people. This is a big advantage for the US and one we must not squander.
 - US interests are best served by maximizing the extent to which the current conflict in Somalia is defined as an internal Somali affair. By contrast, *shabaab* and *Hisbul Islamiyya*'s interests are served when the conflict can be regionalized or globalized, framed as a "Somali versus foreigner" clash. This puts a premium on strategies which work to keep the Ethiopian military out of Somalia.
 - Piracy off the coast of Somalia must be understood and treated as a second order security threat, one that international shipping companies consider manageable. Anti-piracy efforts must not be allowed to compromise policies designed to address the first order security concern in the country, which is the increased activity of al Qaeda in support of *shabaab* in southern Somalia. Anti-piracy initiatives which feature capturing or killing of Somali youth risk inflaming anti-Americanism in Somalia, which will play into the hands of the *shabaab*.
 - US policies which maximize political space for Somalis to negotiate – especially the space for the TFG to reach deals with more pragmatic elements of the Islamist insurgents – will be of great assistance in promoting an end to the crisis. Conversely, US policies which "redline" Somali groups and movements as terrorist reduce negotiating space for the moderates. Somali political affiliations are much more fluid and pragmatic than we usually presume.
 - In the event of a worst-case outcome, in which the capital Mogadishu and most of Somalia falls into the hands of hardline Islamists with ties to al Qaeda, the most

effective short-term policy may simply be to wait rather than rush to a military or political response. Somalis have a long history of using, and then discarding, foreigners and their ideologies once they are no longer of use, and there are reasons to anticipate sharp differences between al Qaeda and its globalist agenda and the more nationalist agenda of the Somali hardline Islamists. Somalia's hardline Islamists will face the country's many faultlines – clan tensions, leadership rivalries, and ideological splits – and could well be pulled down by those centrifugal forces. Put another way, in the face of a worst case scenario, Somali society may possess its own self-correcting mechanisms to deal with foreign and local radicals, and those mechanisms should be given a chance before we rush into risky military solutions. It is worth recalling that in the early 1990s al Qaeda attempted to make inroads into Somali-inhabited East Africa and, like so many foreigners bringing ambitious political projects to Somalia, got its fingers burnt. If al Qaeda does attempt to exploit Somalia as a new base or safe haven, we should work to ensure that the country becomes as much a quagmire for Al Qaeda as it has been for everyone else.