

Somalia: Next Up in the War on Terrorism?

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Somalia now appears to be at or near the top of the list of countries targeted for an expanded war on Islamic terrorists. Somalia's sudden rise to prominence in the war on global terrorism has government officials, analysts, journalists, and the attentive public scrambling for information and analysis about a country that has been studiously ignored since the failed UN intervention there in 1993–1995.

This article outlines the most likely possibilities for how an expanded war on terrorism might play out in Somalia, identifies the reasons why these policies might be chosen, and assesses their appropriateness and likelihood of success. It argues that there are a number of scenarios in which direct operations in Somalia may become necessary and justifiable, but that many other types of interventions would be ill advised and even counterproductive.

Scenario One: A Bombing Campaign to Hit Terrorist Camps

In this scenario, the United States essentially exports the same type of war it has been fighting in Afghanistan into Somalia, relying on aerial bombardments against Islamic terrorist bases and training camps. This has recently been talked up by the media as a likely option, based on unnamed sources in the Department of Defense.

The main drawback to this policy is the absence of meaningful targets in Somalia to bomb. At this time, there are no terrorist bases and training camps in Somalia, and this is widely known within the U.S. government. In the early to mid-1990s, the Somali Islamist movement known as Al Itihaad did control

several small towns and rural outposts, and there is some evidence that non-Somali Islamists passed through and used those bases. But holding fixed territory proved to be a curse for Al Itihaad, as it made them a sitting target for neighboring Ethiopia, which is firmly committed to fighting Islamic extremism. For the past five years, Al Itihaad's strategy has been to integrate into local communities and clans, and work within legitimate sectors—as teachers, health workers, journalists, merchants, and in judicial structures—toward a long-term goal of preparing Somalia for eventual Islamic rule. As a result, there are no local administrations in Somalia controlled by Al Itihaad, and the handful of small, remote bases that radical Islamists once held are abandoned. Bombing those outposts would be an expensive and pointless exercise in rearranging rocks.

Why, then, would a bombing campaign in Somalia even be on the table? One explanation is that the rumors are part of a deterrence tactic, muscle flexing intended to send a message that the United States is prepared to use its military superiority to smash terrorist networks globally. A less generous interpretation is that our policy on the expanded war on terrorism is currently driven by crisis management, which tends to produce tunnel vision and “boilerplate” approaches (i.e., aerial bombings will be used in Somalia because that's what worked in Afghanistan, never mind the fact that the two situations are entirely different). Some individuals in the government are privately suggesting that this is the case.

A more worrisome interpretation is that a decision to bomb Somalia is being driven by political expedience rather than tactical calculations. If it occurs, this would be a grave mistake. How could political calculations drive a decision like this? The United States has promised to take the war on terrorism to wherever terrorists are harbored. But other possible targets for antiterrorist operations, such as Iraq or Sudan, would create enormous diplomatic problems for the United States. Somalia, by contrast, has few friends and no

functional government and would produce much less backlash were it the target of an armed operation. Somalia, in other words, could be next on the list in the war on terrorism not because it poses the greatest threat, but because it's seen as an easy target. Relying on this kind of political logic to determine how and where the war on terrorism is to be waged would seriously undermine U.S. national security interests and should be assiduously avoided.

Scenario Two: “Snatching” Operations to Nab Individual Terrorists in Somalia

This is a more realistic possibility and one that raises a series of critical issues about how we intend to wage an expanded war on terrorism. There are two variations on this theme, one involving targeting non-Somali terrorists who are using Somalia as a safe haven, the other targeting Somali nationals linked to Al Qaeda.

The notion that Somalia is a likely safe haven for fleeing Al Qaeda members is popular these days, based mainly on the observation that Somalia remains a collapsed state with no functional central government and only weak local authorities. Thus, the reasoning goes, Al Qaeda members could find refuge inside Somalia and remain beyond the reach of the law. Prudence dictates that we should be alert to this possibility, and if Al Qaeda members do manage to flee to Somalia, actions taken in “hot pursuit” would be entirely appropriate and justifiable.

But there are a number of reasons why this particular scenario is, if not unlikely, at least not imminent. First, Somalia is a notoriously difficult place for non-Somalis to operate in secrecy. Everyone knows who you are and what you are doing. Second, local and regional authorities in Somalia are falling over one another to establish themselves as the trusted local ally of the West in the war on terrorism. Several set up antiterrorist task forces within days of September 11, in hopes that cooperation with the United States would increase their importance to us and, hence, the likelihood of foreign aid and/or political recognition. Any non-Somali foolish enough to flee to Somalia stands an excellent chance of being turned over by his “hosts,” who have no love lost for radicals bringing trouble to their country. If the

United States were to use Special Forces to nab non-Somalis, there would be only muted opposition from Somali communities, provided they did not kill or injure Somalis in the process.

That would not be the case, however, if the U.S. mission were to target Somali nationals linked to terrorist networks. Plucking Somalis from their own communities is a very risky gambit. Though Somali Islamists are not well loved by most in their own home areas, they are first and foremost clan members, and—as tragically demonstrated in October 1993—an attempt to capture or kill one clan member is seen as an attack on the clan as a whole and elicits a collective response. Parts of Somalia are more peaceful today than they were during the days of the U.S.-led humanitarian intervention, but the country remains a place where virtually everyone is armed. Contrary to popular belief, Somalis are not particularly anti-American—in fact, most respect the United States and wish it were more engaged in Somali efforts at reconstruction and reconciliation. But they are fiercely proud and will almost certainly resist any effort by foreigners to come into their land uninvited and presume the role of judge, jury, and (perhaps) executioner over one of their own.

In addition, the prospect of U.S. Special Forces accurately identifying a Somali suspect in the crowded dens of Mogadishu is even more remote than it was in 1993. Then, at least, the United States had ample local informants, a fixed presence throughout much of Somalia, and first-hand knowledge of General Aideed and his advisers, though even that did not prevent U.S. Army Rangers from making some serious errors (arresting non-Somali UN workers in one case, and arresting an important Somali ally of ours, thinking he was General Aideed, in another). Today, the level of U.S. human intelligence on the ground in Somalia is extremely low, especially in the conflict-ridden southern half of the country where the threat of terrorism is more likely. That raises the risk of embarrassing or costly errors to a level few in Washington should feel comfortable with. While no one is under the illusion that the protracted campaign against terrorism is to be a zero casualty war, a repeat of a “Black Hawk Down” type of incident in Somalia would be an enormous political setback to the campaign against terrorism.

Still, if the national security threat posed by Islamic terrorism in Somalia is serious, these are risks the United States must be willing to shoulder. But therein lies the catch. There is no evidence to date that the threat posed by Somalia's Al Itihaad organization is all that large. In fact, Somalia's Al Itihaad is, in the pantheon of worldwide Islamic radicalism, small potatoes. Throughout the 1990s, the group has mainly been focused on a domestic, not global, agenda. It has in a couple of instances been involved in terrorist activities inside Ethiopia, enough to justify our labeling it (belatedly) as a terrorist organization. Its role in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania is, according to public evidence so far, incidental. The group as a whole is localized these days, working within, not across, clan affiliations, and does not appear to have all that much political muscle in the country. In local Somali politics, Al Itihaad has regularly been outflanked by savvy clan and militia leaders. That does not mean it should be overlooked or underestimated, but it does suggest that the threat posed by radical Islam in Somalia is much lower than in many other parts of the world. The risks we take with the lives of American soldiers in Somalia ought to be commensurate with the perceived threats.

Many commentators dismiss this line of reasoning entirely by considering Al Itihaad as being synonymous with Al Qaeda, as though Al Itihaad were a sort of local subsidiary of Osama bin Laden's global operation. This view is simply wrong and reveals a disturbing level of ignorance about Somalia. Also disturbing are the inaccurate media statements about Al Qaeda's alleged role in the October 1993 deaths of 17 American soldiers in Mogadishu, which reinforce the perception of a strong Osama bin Laden link to Somalia. For Somalis and veteran Somalia watchers, these allegations are mystifying. There is much we do not know about Al Itihaad, but a few facts are relatively clear. Al Itihaad is not an arm of Al Qaeda. Some Somali members of Al Itihaad (including some leading businessmen) have, however, had associations with Al Qaeda that merit close scrutiny. Those associations appear to range from very significant to incidental, from ideologically committed to utterly pragmatic and expedient. Notably, no Somalis appear among the top leadership of Al Qaeda, and none has been used as a terrorist in attacks on the United States. Meanwhile, the bulk of Al Itihaad members in Somalia have nothing to do with terrorism

and Al Qaeda. Most of the members of the Islamic militias in parts of Mogadishu and southern Somalia are simply young gunmen, who will work for whomever pays them a dollar a day.

What this suggests is that the number of Somali nationals who have significant links to Al Qaeda is quite small—10 to 12 individuals at most—and that none of them is especially prominent in that terrorist network. That hardly places Somalia on the front burner of the antiterrorist campaign.

Still, these individuals may well be dangerous and culpable enough to warrant U.S. action. Given the risks outlined above, it is quite likely that the United States will seek to use a proxy for that mission, either instead of or in collaboration with Special Forces. The two possible proxies in the Somali context would either be Ethiopia, which is straining at the bit to play this role, or local Somalis. Both of these options are problematic.

Ethiopia is engaged in its own anti-insurgency campaign against Islamic radicals, one that long predates September 11. It rightly views its long border with anarchic, Islamic Somalia as a major security threat, and has been vigilant to the point of paranoia about the threat of Islamic radicals and other armed insurgencies, like the Oromo Liberation Front, using Somalia as a base of operations against it. In 1996, Ethiopian forces moved across the Somali border to drive Al Itihaad out of the strategic town of Luuq. Ethiopian forces and agents have been inside parts of southern Somalia ever since, forging a series of alliances with Somali clans and militias along its border, arming its Somali clients, and gathering intelligence. Ethiopia sees the current Transitional National Government (TNG) in Mogadishu as a Trojan horse for Al Itihaad, and backs a loose coalition of anti-TNG Somali factions (known as the Somali Restoration and Reconciliation Council, or SRRC) as part of an effort to destabilize and discredit the TNG.¹ The TNG

¹ The TNG was established following a national reconciliation conference in Arte, Djibouti, in August 2000 and claims to be the sole legitimate political authority in Somalia. It subsequently received recognition from the United Nations, but only a handful of countries have recognized it diplomatically. It has been plagued by three basic problems. First, many of the most powerful Somali regional authorities, militias, and factions refused to participate in the Arte conference and refuse to recognize the TNG as anything more than the "Arte faction." The

does, in fact, include in its parliament some Al Itihaad members, and Al Itihaad has attempted to gain control of the TNG's judicial branch. But this does not make the weak and almost irrelevant TNG a radical Islamist front. In its worsening relations with Ethiopia, however, it has found its principal support coming from the Gulf Arab States and Egypt. Current political divisions in Somalia are therefore very much a reflection of a proxy war between Ethiopia and the Arab world. Ethiopia, in short, has its own agenda in Somalia, one that includes exaggerating the threat of Islamic radicalism in Somalia to win support from the United States.

All of this makes Ethiopia a less-than-desirable proxy in Somalia. Indeed, the long historical rivalry between Ethiopia and Somalia, while muted since 1990, is still a rallying point in some Somali quarters. Were Ethiopians to be used as a proxy force to take out Somali Islamic radicals, the backlash in Somalia would be fierce, and could easily make things worse rather than better for the United States. Islamic radicals in Somalia and elsewhere would see such action as more evidence of an unjust war by Christian aggressors against Muslims, and foment anti-Americanism among Somalis who might otherwise be inclined to work with the United States. Moreover, there is not much evidence to suggest that Ethiopian forces and agents would be successful. Ethiopia does have much better intelligence inside Somalia than anyone else and can use its Somali and proto-Somali language speakers to infiltrate and eavesdrop. But the Ethiopians have, over the past five years, been duped on numerous occasions by erstwhile Somali allies hoping to trick Ethiopia into eliminating their rivals by accusing them of being Al Itihaad members. If Ethiopia is to be used inside Somalia, it will be most effective as part of a broader monitoring and surveillance campaign, in border patrols, and perhaps, in special circumstances and in a

reconciliation process in Somalia is therefore incomplete. Second, the TNG quickly alienated its powerful neighbor, Ethiopia, a factor discussed in the main text of this article. Third, the TNG has failed to establish itself as a viable government; after 18 months, it still controls only about half of the city of Mogadishu and little of the interior of the country. Mogadishu's seaport and airport remain closed. The failure to actually govern has eroded the public and international goodwill the TNG initially enjoyed, and scandals involving diverted Saudi foreign aid and the illegal importation of millions of dollars worth of counterfeit Somali shillings by key TNG supporters has been even more damaging.

most discreet manner, in operations where its agents can help apprehend a specific individual.

That leaves local Somali proxies as presumably the most desirable choice. In theory, Somalis are best suited to launch an operation to nab one or several suspects in their own community. In practice, however, working through one or several Somali proxies is replete with headaches—not necessarily insurmountable problems but serious complications. First are problems associated with clannism, which dominates Somali political life in a way few outsiders fully appreciate. To get to a suspected Al Qaeda member, do you work through someone within his sub-clan or work with someone from outside his sub-clan? If the former, you are counting on someone to betray a kinsman—possible under certain circumstances, but more likely to tip off the suspect. If the latter, the resulting action by your Somali proxy will almost certainly produce clan warfare and retaliatory assassinations, earning the United States thousands of new enemies who now identify it with their rival clan.

The second problem is linked to the fact that Somalia remains a collapsed state beset by contested authority. Whatever local proxy the United States tries to work through will be unavoidably associated with one or another faction in local, regional, and national power struggles. The United States will, by choosing to work through one proxy, be perceived as taking sides. Worse, most of the potential local proxies in Somalia are either notoriously unreliable warlords, or weak and ineffective leaders, or both. Many have proposed to set up antiterrorist task forces—with U.S. help and money—but their interests are much more focused on exploiting the war on terrorism to win cash and political recognition from the United States, not in actually combating terrorism. Working with local Somali authorities in the war on terrorism is unavoidable, but it needs to be approached with considerable patience and modest expectations.

The “snatching” scenario leaves open one other looming question, which deserves more attention. What precisely will be the purpose of targeting individuals in collapsed states like Somalia? Do we seek to apprehend and extradite individuals for trial or eliminate them on the spot? The choice we make in this regard will reflect how the United States is framing a strategy for an expanded campaign against terrorism—as an ongoing act of war or

as a transnational law enforcement operation. Both options are laden with complications.

Operations intended to target and kill suspected terrorists in third countries assume that the expanded campaign against terrorism is in fact part of an ongoing (though undeclared) war, defined by wartime rules of engagement and, presumably, the Geneva Conventions. From this viewpoint, the suspected terrorists are combatants and are thus legitimate targets of shoot-to-kill rules of engagement. This option is easier in the sense that it is much less risky to kill someone (preferably from a distance) than it is to apprehend and remove him alive. It also frees the United States and its allies from the difficult task of providing proof of guilt in a court of law, and it eliminates the political dangers of public trials, which Al Qaeda could use as a pulpit against us.

But this option has the distinct disadvantage of appearing to most of the rest of the world as *assassinations sans frontieres*, a form of state-sanctioned murder without due process. If the United States is going to assume the role of judge, jury, and executioner within the borders of other sovereign states (never mind how weak to nonexistent that sovereignty is, empirically), it will have to weather fierce criticism, not just from Muslim countries, but from every state and organization that feels obliged to uphold the basic tenets of international law, including the principle of state sovereignty—which, we will be gently reminded, the United States invoked to justify the war on Iraq in 1991. Somalis suspected of links to Al Qaeda will not present themselves as soldiers, but rather as businessmen, teachers, or sheikhs, making it appear that the United States is killing civilians, not combatants, and thereby violating the Geneva Conventions. In sum, the tactic of killing suspected terrorists abroad runs the risk of eroding the moral and legal high ground upon which the United States now stands in this war on terrorism. There are those who dismiss the notion of moral high ground as inconsequential, but if this is to be a protracted war on terrorism, it will require both external allies and ongoing American public support. That support is easier to sustain on moral high ground. It is not ground to be casually abandoned for reasons of tactical expediency.

One potential solution to this conundrum is “plausible deniability”—targeted killings of suspected terrorists,

which appear to be accidents and leave reason to doubt that the United States or its allies had anything to do with them. This will no doubt be a very tempting option for U.S. decisionmakers frustrated by the many political complications that all other options seem to create. Alas, even this solution is no silver bullet, in part because those kinds of political assassinations are difficult to do and in part because plausible deniability exists only in the eye of the beholder. Much of the rest of the world would be disinclined to view the sudden death of a suspected terrorist as an accident and much more inclined to accept conspiracy theories that the United States was behind it—even if it were not.

By contrast, capture and involuntary extradition of individual suspects has the advantage of appearing to work within a legal framework, giving suspects due process and reinforcing the message that the United States is a country that acts according to the rule of law. The drawbacks of this approach are painfully evident. It is a much riskier type of snatching operation; it presumes that the United States possesses enough evidence to win convictions against the suspects; and it begs the question of whose law is to be the basis for such cases. What we would term apprehension and extradition would be viewed by many other countries as state-sponsored kidnapping, the actions of a self-appointed “world policeman.” The Third World is hypersensitive about state sovereignty, even regarding collapsed states like Somalia, and will take a dim view of this approach. Even states threatened by Islamic extremism will tend to view this not as a necessary step in the war on terrorism, but as a preview of the day when the United States violates their own sovereignty in the name of a higher cause. If the United States goes this route, it will need to do a considerable amount of diplomatic legwork to mute criticism from important Third World leaders.

Scenario Three: Proxy War against the TNG

If, despite ample evidence to the contrary, the Transitional National Government in Mogadishu is perceived to be a front for radical Islamists—a sort of Somali version of the Taliban regime—then there is the possibility that a proxy war could be waged through anti-TNG Somali factions with the aim of driving the TNG out of power in Mogadishu. Although a proxy war against the TNG currently appears unlikely, it is not

unthinkable. Notably, there are reports that Ethiopia is assembling thousands of newly recruited militiamen from among its Somali clients in the Somalia Restoration and Reconciliation Council (SRRC) for training near Baidoa in the Bay region, a development that occurred shortly after a public visit by U.S. military officials to SRRC headquarters in December 2001. This may add up to nothing, but it may also be the first step in preparing the SRRC and other anti-TNG militias to play the role of a “Northern Alliance” in Somalia.

There are three different variations on how a proxy war might play itself out in Somalia. In one instance, the United States would actively support such a proxy war against the TNG, perhaps providing military intelligence and arms to the Ethiopian-backed opposition groups as they attack the TNG. This would involve either very bad intelligence or a willful disregard for the facts, since (as discussed above) the TNG is not a Somali version of the Taliban. The policy would, however, be attractive to those who subscribe to a “better safe than sorry” approach to eliminating Islamic radicalism, would keep the risk of American losses very low, and would greatly please Ethiopia. But the policy would create chaos, bloodshed, looting, and humanitarian crisis in Mogadishu, generate hundreds of thousands of enemies among Somalis who might otherwise be allies, link the United States to some very unsavory warlords within the SRRC, and oblige the United States to support a new, post-TNG government in Mogadishu. This is, in sum, a very bad idea with just enough politically attractive features to make it a worrisome possibility.

A second and more likely type of proxy war scenario would be one in which Ethiopia decides to take matters into its own hands by unilaterally supporting anti-TNG Somali militias in a military push against the TNG, without American approval. Ethiopia perceives itself as the regional hegemon in the Horn of Africa and—as its actions in the war against Eritrea made amply clear—will do whatever it feels needs to be done to promote its security, regardless of American protests. Ethiopia would have few qualms about taking unilateral action against the TNG using the broader American war on terrorism as cover for their actions. Unfortunately for the United States, few Somalis would believe that it did not give tacit support to such an action, so the United States would be held accountable for the war, subsequent

chaos, and humanitarian crises that ensued, even if it was opposed to the action.

A final variation on this theme is what could be called the “Jericho scenario.” In this instance, the preparation of the SRRC and/or Ethiopia to attack the TNG, combined with rumors of U.S. plans to target Islamic radicals inside Somalia, creates such a loss of confidence within the TNG that it collapses (partially or completely) without a shot being fired. A protracted round of negotiations would then perhaps produce a new transitional government more satisfactory to the Ethiopians, various SRRC factions, and the United States. If those negotiations failed, Mogadishu would eventually revert to its pre-TNG state of neighborhood-based, informal systems of governance, and Somalia as a whole would continue in its protracted condition of state collapse. There is at least scattered evidence that the partial collapse of the TNG could indeed occur. The TNG appears to have no funds to pay demobilized militia members, who have been engaging in serious episodes of looting in Mogadishu. If the TNG’s principle supporters—top businessmen in Mogadishu and the Saudis—no longer have confidence in the TNG’s future and are no longer willing to fund it, the TNG could conceivably crumble. If so, Mogadishu and southern Somalia are likely to experience heightened levels of lawlessness and banditry in coming months.

Scenario Four: Surveillance, Monitoring, and Interdiction

Strengthening surveillance, monitoring, and interdiction is an obvious, necessary, and uncontroversial policy, which the United States and its allies have already begun to implement. U.S. military aircraft are conducting reconnaissance flights over the country; Somali businesses, political groups, and the diaspora are under greater surveillance than in the past; and naval vessels are appearing in waters off Somalia’s long unpatrolled coast in efforts to interdict terrorists and the movement of illicit materiel. The United States can expect a long period of monitoring and interdiction in Somalia, aimed both at apprehending suspects and preventing Somalia from being used as a new base of operations for Al Qaeda. If the United States chooses, it can take this unilateral and somewhat threatening action and make it more diplomatically palatable and reassuring to the Somali people by presenting naval patrols as a

partnership to assist Somali authorities in policing the coastline and preventing illegal fishing, toxic waste dumping, and export of charcoal from Somalia (a practice that is illegal in the country, but unpoliced, and is causing environmental devastation in some areas). Naval patrols could in that instance be seen as a “win-win” policy for both Somalia and the United States. These are the kinds of seemingly minor diplomatic gestures that can calm nervous Somalis and perhaps win a measure of goodwill to be redeemed at a later date.

It is entirely possible that monitoring and interdiction is the most the United States will ultimately do in Somalia, provided the threat of terrorism is perceived to remain relatively low.

Scenario Five: Constructive Engagement with Somali Authorities

One of the principal problems in combating and preventing terrorism in Somalia is the absence of a functional central government. It deprives the United States and its allies of a sovereign partner with a national law enforcement capacity to investigate and arrest terrorist suspects within the rule of law. While it is certainly true that the absence of a functional central government frees the United States to operate unilaterally inside the country with few political and diplomatic complications, that advantage is offset by the fact that large zones of state collapse like Somalia will remain chronic problems as possible safe havens for transnational criminals and terrorists seeking to operate beyond the rule of law. To the extent that the war on terrorism increasingly shifts away from military action and toward sustained, global law-enforcement actions, it is critical that all inhabitable territories of the world be subject to the rule of law and monitored by effective police and judicial systems to enforce the law.

Some observers have argued that it is for precisely this reason that the United States should focus its antiterrorist policies in Somalia on a much higher level of partnership with the fledgling Transitional National Government in Mogadishu. In this view, the United States should recognize the TNG diplomatically and work quickly to help build up its law enforcement capacity. The TNG itself was quick to point out as well that it can be a needed partner in the war on terrorism, but only if more powerful nations assist it.

A scenario in which the United States and its allies opt to partner with and work through the TNG is, however, unlikely for several reasons. First, it would infuriate Ethiopia, which views the TNG as a front for Islamic radicals and is trying to discredit it, not legitimize it. Second, there is simply too much doubt in the outside world about the extent of Islamist influence in the TNG to view it as a reliable partner in an antiterrorist campaign. Third, even without questions about the influence of Islamists in its ranks, the TNG has not provided much evidence that any assistance it garners would actually yield improved law enforcement and governance capacity. Much of the foreign assistance it has received in the past 18 months (mainly from Gulf Arab states) has lined the pockets of TNG members and supporters, instead of being put to good use in building a fledgling state. The TNG lacks the necessary credibility to win the confidence of the United States as a partner in a war on terrorism, and the window of opportunity it had for earning that confidence has probably passed. The TNG would need to take a series of dramatic steps involving purging Al Itihaad members and reassuring Ethiopia, and even then it is not clear that that would make an appreciable difference in its external relations. If the TNG were able to rehabilitate its image with the Ethiopians and the West, and the United States were to opt to work through the TNG in order to place antiterrorist operations within a domestic legal framework, it would be a paper-thin arrangement that would only expose the TNG’s virtually nonexistent capabilities.

A more likely scenario involving constructive engagement with Somali authorities would involve partnership and cooperation with existing regional authorities—and possibly with the very powerful business community in Somalia. There is at present only one functional regional authority in Somalia, the government of the unrecognized secessionist state of Somaliland (in the northwest of the country). Somaliland enjoys greater levels of peace, law and order, and economic recovery than any other part of Somalia, and sports a government that is, if not ideal, at least minimally functional. That government, led by President Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, is on good terms with Ethiopia and is firmly against radical Islamists. A U.S. policy to build up Somaliland’s policing capacities and engage in joint operations with Somaliland would face a major diplomatic impediment—namely, it would be seen as

American encouragement and de facto recognition of a secessionist state in Africa. This is an issue of extreme sensitivity on a continent beset with artificial borders and separatist movements. Moreover, the threat of radical Islamic activity is lower in Somaliland than anywhere else in Somalia, so such a partnership is probably unnecessary. If partnership with Somaliland occurs, it is likely to involve agreements for U.S. military access to the prized runway and seaport at the coastal town of Berbera. Any other use of Somaliland authorities as proxies in a war on terrorism would need to be done with considerable discretion, probably via the Ethiopians.

Not long ago, the northeast (nonsecessionist) regional state of Puntland would have been a valuable local proxy in the campaign against terrorism. Puntland has for a decade been an area of stability in Somalia, but one which has been home to a more robust Al Itihaad presence than many other parts of the country. The region's Al Itihaad members are fully integrated into local society; indeed, they managed to gain control over Puntland's judicial system despite the deep animosity of Puntland president Abdullahi Yusuf toward Islamic radicalism. (Yusuf is, not coincidentally, Ethiopia's most important Somali ally.) But the Puntland administration split over a leadership and constitutional crisis in the summer of 2001, a feud that led to armed clashes between Abdullahi Yusuf's camp and a rival group and culminated in the collapse of the weak Puntland administration. Because the leadership dispute in Puntland remains an ongoing conflict, the United States and its allies will need to tread very carefully in presuming that a revived Puntland administration can serve as a proxy and partner in the near future. If Abdullahi Yusuf is able to regain full control over Puntland, and the United States opts to work with his administration, care must be taken not to allow him to wage a war against his political rivals in the name of antiterrorism. That would only alienate a great many Puntlanders, who are deeply unhappy with his rule and feel that he has been imposed on them by Ethiopia. A U.S.-led effort at full reconciliation and a unity government in Puntland could, by contrast, win many friends and create a much more secure environment in which to monitor and prevent terrorist activities in this strategic region.

A final type of constructive engagement that could conceivably occur in Somalia would involve the real power brokers of the country, the top businessmen. In this scenario, the United States and the West would use both carrots and sticks to create incentives for Somalia's influential business class to work with us in a partnership to prevent Somalia from being used as a base of operations for Islamic terrorists.

A small group of wealthy and powerful businessmen—about a dozen or so in Hargeisa (Somaliland) and perhaps several dozen in Mogadishu—have emerged over the course of the 1990s as a new political elite in Somalia. These individuals are for the most part “new money,” having made their fortunes in the wartime and post-war economy of Somalia. Some of their business ventures were initially illicit and part of the economy of plunder during the famines of 1991–1992. These businessmen have since moved into increasingly “legitimate” commercial sectors and now have sizable investments in import-exports, transport, telecommunications, and financial services—including the well-known “hawilaad” or money transfer companies that have come under close scrutiny since September 11. Collectively, this new business class has grown wealthy and powerful by learning how to manage risk and exploit opportunities in a high-risk environment of war, warlordism, banditry, and state collapse. They are above all else pragmatists who are adept at cost-benefit analysis. This is a group trait, which can and should be used to our advantage.

By the late 1990s, these merchants grew tired of paying “taxes” to warlords who provided no security. The businessmen transformed the political landscape of southern Somalia by working in concert to marginalize the warlords, by buying the militiamen out from beneath them. They then subcontracted out the task of managing the militia and creating a judiciary to the local shari`a court authorities. This bold move produced dramatically improved levels of security in south Mogadishu, at the nearby seaports, and on main commercial arteries. But it raised concerns that the businessmen were helping to build up a shari`a police and judicial system in which Al Itihaad members were prominent.

Long-standing rumors that some of the largest businesses, such as the al-Barakat company (which was a leading company in both financial services and the

telecommunication sector until the United States froze its assets following September 11), have close ties to Al Itihaad and to external Islamist movements raised additional fears that the new business-shari`a court alliance was a dangerous turn of events. When those same leading businessmen gave sustained financial support to the Transitional National Government, fears that the TNG was also a front for Islamic radicalism were raised as well.

In reality, most of the businessmen involved in supporting the shari`a court militias and the TNG are pragmatists, seeking to harness the shari`a courts to provide better security and a safer environment in which to conduct commerce. There are, no doubt, a handful of businessmen who are genuinely committed to the idea of Islamic rule and to Al Itihaad, though that does not automatically qualify them as supporters of terrorism. Many other businessmen with connections to Al Itihaad and perhaps even Al Qaeda have pursued those ties for reasons of expediency—for security, to access credit, to tap into the network of business contacts and information that that association provides. Precisely because these are ties defined largely by self-interest, they are amenable to external efforts to reshape the cost-benefit analysis on which they are based.

The United States and its allies could embark on a policy of establishing greater links to the Somali business community with the aim of greater partnership in a war on terrorism. The businessmen would be potentially valuable eyes and ears in the country; they know what is passing through the main ports; they control the flow of money and communications in the country; they possess vastly stronger networks of informants and local partners throughout the country than do any of the political groups; and they are the kingmakers in Somali politics. The United States could propose a quid pro quo with them. In return for their cooperation in monitoring Islamic radicalism and encouraging moderate Islamic politics in the country, the United States could take a number of steps to improve the business climate in the country and provide new commercial opportunities for Somali entrepreneurs. Left unspoken but understood would be the consequences of a failure to cooperate with the United States. Given the pragmatic nature of the Somali business class, this proposed partnership might well prove attractive to them. There is at this time, however, no indication that the United States is adopting

this strategy. To date, U.S. policy discussions regarding Somalia have emphasized more of a military than a diplomatic approach.

A policy of constructive engagement, whether with the Somali business elite or local governments or both, presumes a long-term commitment to Somalia that the West has in the past failed to sustain. This is painfully evident today in the streets of the major Somali cities and in smaller towns. There, Western aid is virtually nonexistent, whereas Islamic aid agencies are providing free or subsidized schooling, running health posts and community outreach services, supporting mosques, and offering scholarships for study in the Middle East. Although many of these Islamic aid agencies are relatively apolitical, seeking only to deepen the Islamic faith in Somalia, others promote ideas that could produce a new generation of young Somalis who are much more receptive to radical Islamic agendas. To the extent that the war on terrorism includes a battle for hearts and minds, the United States and the West need to do a better job of sending a message to Somalia that they care about the long-term prospects of a country immersed in profound political, economic, and humanitarian crises. Protracted indifference followed by threatening military moves is not likely to achieve that goal.

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