Prospects for *Al Itihad* & Islamist Radicalism in Somalia

Andre Le Sage

Following the terror attacks in the United States on 11 September, there has been growing concern over the role of *Al Itihad al Islaami* in the financial and political networks that sustain Osama bin Laden and the *Al Qaeda* network. The UK's *Daily Telegraph* (2001) reported that 'between 3,000 and 5,000 members of the al Qa'eda and al-Itihad partnership are operating [in Somalia], with 50,000 to 60,000 supporters and reservists.' The *Washington Times* (2001) cited US intelligence sources that, 'There are indications bin Laden is setting up a new base of operations in Somalia.' In response, *Le Monde* (2001) and other media outlets have indicated the potential for US military strikes against Somalia.

Thus far, international attention to *Al Itihad* has framed Somalia as a 'collapsed state' providing sanctuary for extremist movements. *Al Itihad* (the Islamic Union) seeks to establish an Islamic state in Somalia that adheres to a strict reading of the Koran, similar to the *wahabi* interpretation used by the Taleban in Afghanistan. Unconfirmed allegations link the movement to the killing of 18 US soldiers in Mogadishu during the 1993 UNOSOM intervention, and logistical support for the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. The Government of Ethiopia has accused *Al Itihad* of direct links with bin Laden, while militia leader Hussein Aideed has linked the movement to Somalia's newly formed Transitional National Government (UN-IRIN, 2001).

Without more detailed knowledge of *Al Itihad*, it is impossible to understand the place of militant Islamic movements in the wider Somali context. Further, policy makers will be ill-equipped to design a comprehensive response to the root causes of religious militancy. Based on the author's work and field research in Somalia, this briefing sets out to describe what is known of *Al Itihad*, its political trajectory to date, and its role in the wider Somali context of Islamic politics, clan lineage and state collapse.

Islam in Somalia

Somali society is organised according to segmentary lineage principles that divide communities into patrilineal clans. However, Islamic faith is one of the horizontal identities (including class, race and location of origin) that cut across clan lines (Besteman, 1999). In pre-colonial times, rural Somali communities recognised two distinct authorities, clan elders and religious leaders, whose responsibilities in the conduct of individual and community affairs overlapped to the extent that Islam was essentially assimilated into clan culture (Lewis, 1961). This symbiotic relationship has persisted throughout the colonial and post-colonial era.

Aside from mosques, Sufist *tariqa* are the oldest and most widespread Islamic organisations active in Somalia today. These sects emerged in Somalia during the mid-nineteenth century. They follow the teachings of various Islamic mystics and scholars, have no overt political agenda, and tend towards peaceful co-existence with secular political authorities. The *Qadiriya, Salihiya,* and *Ahmadiya* sects – found worldwide – are the most influential in Somalia today (Lewis, 1961). Of these, only the *Salihiya* sect is distinguished by its involvement in modern politics. In the early 1900s, the *Salihiya* leader, Said Mohamed Abdullah Hassan, led the resistance of the Dervishes to British and Italian colonial rule in what is now northern Somalia.

Modern political Islamic movements did not emerge in Somalia until the late 1960s, when Somali students (particu-

larly those studying at *Al Azhar* in Egypt) and employment seekers were exposed to the teachings and public support for political Islam in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries where *Al Aqwan al Muslimin* (The Muslim Brotherhood) was gaining widespread support. Upon return from abroad, many of these individuals formed parallel Somali movements to *Al Aqwan*, seeking to peacefully transform the Somali state to be based on Islamic law (*shari'a*). Their beliefs led to public resistance to Siad Barre's plans for 'scientific socialism', and ultimately to government repression. For instance, when followers of the movement publicly rejected the Family Law of 1975 for its recognition and promotion of the legal and economic equality of women, demonstrations were eventually put down by the execution of ten prominent clerics. Following the repression and fracturing of *Al Aqwan*, a period of relative inactivity followed when Islamist organisations were not prominent in Somali politics. However, instead of disappearing altogether, the remnants of *Al Aqwan* went to ground and began organising for their political return at a later date.

After the collapse of the Siad Barre government in 1991, a number of different movements developed in Somalia whose ideology and objectives cover a wide-spectrum of political philosophy. These include *Al Islah, Al Tabliq, Al Takfir,* and *Al Itihad*. Even a brief overview of the interests and activities of these various movements warns against any simple conflation of all politically organised Islamist groups as 'fundamentalist' or 'terrorist'. For instance, *Al Islah*, whose name translates to 'reconciliation' or 'mediation', seeks to infuse Somali politics with a liberal reading of Islamic values through entirely non-violent means. Membership in the movement is generally drawn from the educated elite of the Hawiye clan, including former politicians and civil servants, academics, health and engineering professionals, and businessmen / traders. Their activities are

focused in Mogadishu, including basic literacy training in Koranic schools, vocational training and higher education at Mogadishu University. Some humanitarian organisations, such as Mercy International, are integrally connected to *Al Islah*. Of the modern political Islamic organisations, *Al Islah* appears the most moderate and, due to its adherence to internationally recognised principles of human rights and gender equality as a member of the Peace and Human Rights Network, finds itself in confrontation with more militant movements such as *Al Itihad.*

Al Itihad al Islaami

Within this broader context of Islamic faith and organisation, there are very few examples of politically oriented Islamist movements advocating or engaging in direct violence to achieve their objectives. The primary exception is *Al Itihad*, which emerged as a tangible political force immediately after the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, and the ensuing power struggle between clan-based militia-factions across the country. The origins of *Al Itihad* are similar to those of any other militia-faction in Somalia, which found the mobilisation of opposition to Siad Barre and the procurement of light weapons an easy task after the end of the Cold War. While the militia-factions acquired financial support in the form of remittances from the diaspora in Western countries, *Al Itihad* received support from charitable Islamic groups in the Middle East. *Al Itihad* was distinguished from the militia-factions by their ability to construct a cross-clan and national movement based on the appeal of Islamist ideology as an alternative to a failed nationalism and divisive clanism.

In broad terms, the political trajectory of *Al Itihad* since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime can be broken down into three stages:

Military Movement: In the early days of the civil war, the strategic objective of *Al*

Itihad was to build power by taking control of key economic installations across Somalia. *Al Itihad's* initial success came in Kismayo in January 1991, when the movement took control of the seaport, a lucrative transit point for taxing international aid and import / export goods. However, in March that year, General Farah Aideed advanced on Kismayo with his United Somali Congress militia (USC, drawn from the Hawiye clan). In exchange for the right to administer the town in the future, *Al Itihad* offered to fight side-by-side in defence of Kismayo with the secular Somali National Front faction (SNF, drawn from the Darod clan). The offer was not accepted and, amidst continuing divisions within the *Al Itihad* and SNF ranks, Aideed was able to capture the town.

After the fall of Kismayo, all Darod clans were targeted by harsh reprisals from the Hawiye militia – including summary executions, systematic rape and looting – due to their genealogical association with the former president. Following these events, much of the remaining trust between cross-clan allies was undermined, and *Al Itihad* broke increasingly along clan lines. Fleeing from Kismayo, Darod remnants of *Al Itihad* re-grouped in Bosasso and Garowe towns in northeast Somalia (now known as 'Puntland'). In 1992, *Al Itihad* again attempted to take control of key commercial points in Bosasso. This led to a military confrontation with the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF, drawn from the Darod clan), in which *Al Itihad* was again defeated and forcefully displaced.

The movement re-located to the towns of Luuq and Dolo in Gedo region. There, it was able to court support from long-term Darod:Marehan residents (the *guri*) whose relations with the newly arrived Marehan communities (the *galti*) were tense. The *galti* clans formed the backbone of the SNF faction, leading to intra-clan competition between *Al Itihad* and the SNF in southwestern Somalia. Originally, *Al*

Itihad participated alongside the SNF in the defense of Marehan territory from SNA-Habr Gedir incursions. Once victorious, *Al Itihad* found itself in control of the district administrations in Luuq and Dolo towns, and temporarily extended their influence to Bulo Hawo and El Wak.

Again, however, the group was seen as a threat to the authority of secular powers – this time both the SNF faction and the Ethiopian government. The latter, fearful of the importation of radical Islam into its restive southern regions, supported the SNF to overthrow *Al Itihad*. The movement was known to have links with both the Ogadeni National Liberation Front (ONLF), and accused of supporting the overthrow of the Ethiopian government following bomb attacks in Addis Ababa hotels during 1996. In that year and again in 1997, the Ethiopian military crossed into Somalia numerous times, defeating *Al Itihad* and driving them further south along the west bank of the Juba River (Menkhaus, 1999).

Social & Economic Consolidation: Following its military defeats, *Al Itihad* withdrew from direct military activity. It would, however, be wrong to assume that *Al Itihad* gave up on its ultimate political agenda. The movement is rumoured to maintain military training camps in both southern and northern Somalia (e.g. Ras Kiamboni in Lower Juba, El Wak in Gedo and Las Qoray in Sanag). Further, *Al Itihad* has maintained its military capabilities through temporary political alliances with other factions and foreign governments, for instance during the Ethiopian-Eritrean border war.

To draw Ethiopian attention away from the northern front, Eritrea provided support to the ONLF in Region 5 through Somalia (ION, 1999a). Weapons and training were provided through Hussein Aideed's militia-faction and *Al Itihad*, leading to the brief cooperation of these groups.

However, these were alliances of convenience based on the logic that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', and only lasted for brief periods of time. As such, *Al Itihad* shifted its tactics away from direct politico-military confrontation and concentrated on expanding nationwide influence as a grassroots movement for order, stability and moral rectitude. Rather than working against the grain of the Somali political economy, *Al Itihad* found new ways of working within the clan system to build a powerful, but latent network of support within different clans and business groups. This can be seen in its strong ties to *Shari'a* courts, its beneficial relationship with key traders and remittance banks, and its efforts to court support from Somalia's poorest urban populations with offers of welfare services.

As early as 1994, *Shari'a* courts had already been established in some parts of Somalia *without* connections to *Al Itihad*. Their *modus vivendi* was to establish law and order in conjunction with the secular authority of local faction leaders. In Belet Weyne, the *Shari'a* court was an integral part of a relatively benign local administration that balanced clan interests among the Hawadle, Galjel and Jejele clans, and used independent court militia (which did not practice corporal punishment) as an impartial force to maintain security and order. In north Mogadishu, Ali Mahdi supported the creation of *Shari'a* courts to counter the insecurity of former militia who became uncontrolled *mooryaan*, or bandits. In both instances, criminal activity fell sharply for a time. However, the Belet Weyne court was undermined in 1998 following the failure of the Hawiye reconciliation conference and renewed inter-clan tensions, while the north Mogadishu courts were violently closed by Ali Mahdi when a rivalry for leadership ensued between him and the chief of the *Shari'a* court, Sheikh Ali Dhere. After 1997, however, a new round of *Shari'a* courts emerged in south Mogadishu and later in Merka with integral connections

to *Al Itihad*. This owed a great deal to the failure of the militia-factions to provide a stable environment for the investment of the local business community. Following the failure of the Cairo and Sodere peace accords, as well as the short-lived agreement amongst Aideed and Ali Mahdi to establish the Benadir Administration in 1998, the secular milita-factions were unable to maintain the support of the business community. As an alternative means of establishing a stable environment for their business interests without the need to pay protection money to the feuding warlords, the elite of the Mogadishu business community – including a number of large-scale import / export traders and transporters of food aid for international relief agencies – supported key member of *Al Itihad* to establish *Shari'a* courts in south Mogadishu (ION, 1999b). These courts are founded on independent, clan-based agreements and only operate in particular quarters of the city. However, the network was eventually linked together into a single authority for the city. The Secretary General of the Joint Islamic Courts was Hassan Dahir Aweis, self-professed military commander of *Al Itihad*.

In addition to Somalia's largest traders, remittance banks (also known as the *hawlidad* system) became a significant source of revenue and patronage for *Al Itihad*. In the mid-1990s, when militia-factions fragmented and turned against one another, direct remittance support for the factional struggle decreased. Instead, the diaspora increasingly channeled money directly to war-affected kin. Trust networks established on common commitments to political Islamist agenda gained Somali businessmen easy access to capital through connections to Islamist counterparts in Dubai and Saudi Arabia. Faith-based credit schemes left Islamist businessmen well positioned to take over Somalia's $500 million per year remittance business. In order to conduct their business across the country, the remittance agencies slowly built a sophisti-

cated tele-communications network to serve their needs (Ahmed, 2000). This has created an independent and primarily legitimate financial sector in its own right. Yet, the remittance companies – as a source of profit sharing and a channel for foreign support – remain an essential financial asset for *Al Itihad* (ION, 1999c). In addition, these companies are considered to be sources of employment for devout, young followers of the movement.

The financial strength gleaned from these connections has been spent in two ways. First, *Al Itihad*'s has cultivated public support by delivering welfare services to the urban poor in major centres across the country. For instance, during the 1997/8 El Nino floods in Somalia, Islamic organisations were an essential and well-organised part of the relief response. This strategy is not different to that of *Al Islah*, except for *Al Itihad*'s concentration on the most disenfranchised communities susceptible to indoctrination to more militant agendas. Second, to build a patronage network within each clan by increasing the influence of like-minded individuals within each clan to assume the reigns of 'traditional' authority, This is evidenced during the recent constitutional crisis in Puntland. As President Abdulai Yusuf's tenure elapsed, *Al Itihad* used its influence within the Bosasso business community and financial payoffs within the Majerteen councils of elders to disrupt reconciliation with Yusuf and propose alternative presidential candidates.

Political Marginalisation: Following the Somalia National Peace Conference in Arta, Djibouti, a Transitional National Government (TNG) was created in Mogadishu in October 2001. *Al Itihad* and other Islamic movements have found the inception of the TNG to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the TNG controls only a small portion of territory in the capital city, its strength depends on the financial contributions of businessmen who have been supporting the *Shari'a*

courts for years (Le Sage, forthcoming). This provides the movement with potential influence in a weak and divided administration. On the other hand, the direct influence of *Al Itihad* has diminished as they are no longer the primary recipients of the business community's support. Further, the TNG has marginalised *Al Itihad* as it seeks to establish an independent character not connected to 'fundamentalist' elements that will endanger relations with Ethiopia and Western donors.

The TNG has endeavoured to build national and international support by re-establishing peace and security in Mogadishu. There are two significant implications of this effort for *Al Itihad*. First, the initial phase of this exercise was not demobilisation *per se*, but rather the conscription of former militia into training camps that form the basis for a national army. This deprived *Al Itihad* and the *Shari'a* courts of their financial base to support militia, and much of their fighting forces are now under the loose control of the TNG and its supporters. Second, although it is hardly active, the TNG judiciary system has provided a very weak institutional role for former *Shari'a* court members to administer the TNG penal system and sections of the police force. This weak inclusion of political Islamist elements in the TNG has served to neutralise their dissent during the transition period.

Given dissatisfaction with their turn of fortune since the establishment of the TNG, *Al Itihad* is likely to see the emotional turmoil following the 11 September terror attacks as an opportunity to re-create political momentum and build public support following its marginalisation under the TNG. This hypothesis is supported by recent events in Mogadishu, where anti-American and pro-Al Qaeda demonstrations have been organised. This appears a dangerous strategy if efforts to build public support also attract the attention of Western governments look-

ing to suppress militant organisations by force.

Conclusion

Al Itihad emerged as a politico-military force in Somalia after the fall of Siad Barre and the collapse of government institutions. However, its origins lie in opposition to the former dictator's repressive state and bankrupt economy. Even when successful at manipulating tensions between sub-clans and making alliances temporary alliances with milita-factions, *Al Itihad* has not been able to marshal enough military strength and community support to sustain its temporary political gains. Instead, in the face of continuing pauperization in the hands of Somalia's secular politicians, the movement grew by offering a mixture of security, meaning and economic opportunity to both the Somali business class and marginal urban communities. Although it has not been a central force behind developments in Somalia or the Horn of Africa region over the past decade, *Al Itihad* continues to lay the foundations for a more significant political struggle in the future. Its strategy is to use economic leverage, Islamic populism and clandestine patronage networks to manipulate leadership and communal tensions within Somalia's nascent administrations.

References

Besteman, C (1999), *Unraveling Somalia*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

The Daily Telegraph (2001), 'Banks-to-terror conglomerate faces US wrath', London: 28 September.

Indian Ocean Newsletter (1999a), *'Somalia: The Conflict Gets Regional'*, Issue 857, Paris; (1999b), 'Somalia: Warlords May Be Sidelined', Issue 878, Paris; (1999c), 'Somalia: Islamist Militia Offensive', Issue 879, Paris.

UN-IRIN (2001), 'Ethiopia: Government accuses Al-Ittihad of Bin Laden Links', and 'Somalia: Aydid accuses TNG of terrorist links', 26 September.

Le Monde (2001), 'Les Etats-Unis envisageraient des opérations en Somalie', Paris, 22 September.

Le Sage, A (forthcoming), 'The Political Economy of Transition in Somalia', mimeo available from author.

Lewis, I (1961), *A Pastoral Democracy*, Oxford: James Currey.

Menkhaus, K (1999), 'Studies on Governance in Gedo Region', Nairobi: UNDOS.

The Washington Times (2001), 'Terrorist group likely on the move', Washington, DC.

Eritrea in Crisis

Half the leadership of the movement that won Eritrea's independence is now either in prison or 'frozen' – a peculiarly Eritrean form of political suspended animation. They are accused of undermining Eritrea's national unity and jeopardizing its security during wartime (potentially 'treason' charges). The leader of the university student union is in jail for critical remarks he made in his valedictory address in July. All the private newspapers are shut down.

We urge the government of Eritrea greater respect for diverse opinions both at home and abroad, reinstatement of the private press and a clearly defined procedure regarding 'due process' for those accused of 'political crimes'.

For further information the following addresses may be of use:

www.asmarino.com
www.dehai.com
www.shaebia.org
akililu41@yahoo.de (editor, Asmara-based English-language weekly, *Eritrea Profile*);
veronica@embassyeritrea.org (Information officer, Washington, DC.
ncew@eol.com.er (trade union federation, Asmara);
nuew@eol.com.er (national women's union, Asmara)
nueys@eol.com.er (national youth organization, Asmara)   ▲