POLITICAL ISLAM IN SOMALIA

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In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC, Islamic politics and movements around the world are coming under greater scrutiny than ever. The Horn of Africa is of particular importance on this score as a region where radical Islamist movements have been increasingly active over the past decade. While the endemic conflicts in the Horn are attributable to a wide range of causes, radical Islamic movements are intimately involved in some of the region's turmoil.

A quick inventory underscores the point. Sudan has been home to a fundamentalist Islamic regime since 1989; for a number of years in the 1990s it even hosted Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization. The Sudanese government's insistence on imposing Sharia law on its southern, non-Muslim populations has been one of the factors fueling the long-running civil war there. In Ethiopia, where about half of the population is Muslim, the government has been waging a decade-long battle against Islamist insurgencies. Those insurgency groups enjoy support from external Islamic backers waging jihad on what they consider an oppressive Christian regime. Eritrea, the population of which is split evenly between Muslims and Christians (Orthodox), has to date man-

aged to keep religious politics relatively depoliticized, but Eritreans are expressing growing concern over "identity politics" issues voiced by its mainly coastal Muslim population. In Uganda, three mainly non-Muslim ethnic insurgency groups – the Lord's Resistance Army, the West Nile Bank Front and the Allied Democratic Forces – have all received backing from the Islamist government of Sudan.[2]

Kenya's Muslim population – comprising 25-30 percent of the total population – has for the most part kept its political activity within the parameters of legal party politics, but it includes radical elements sympathizing with or actively supporting al-Ittihad (Islamist) cells. Kenya was also the site of the 1998 terrorist attack on the U.S. embassy by non-Kenyan Islamic extremists.[3] Because large sections of its border areas and many of the teeming slums of Nairobi are essentially beyond the control of Kenyan police, Kenya remains a convenient haven for Islamic radicals and weapons smugglers.

Finally, there is Somalia, a country that has endured over a decade of civil war, recurring famine and complete state collapse. Despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that it is the only country in the Horn of Africa which is almost entirely Muslim,[4] Somalia has not historically been

home to the same level of radical Islamic political activity as has been the case in neighboring, religiously divided states. But over the course of the past decade, Islamic political activity has dramatically increased in Somalia. Sharia courts have sprung up throughout the country; al-Ittihad groups have temporarily seized control of several ports and towns; al-Ittihad cells exercise influence within the political and commercial elite; and in a few instances, evidence suggests that Somali al-Itiihad cells as well as secular factions have hosted and facilitated the operations of radical non-Somali Islamists such as Bin Laden's Al Qaeda. Ethiopian fears – whether warranted or exaggerated – that Islamic radicals are using Somalia as a base of operations have led Ethiopia into protracted and at times intense military operations inside Somalia and even across Kenya's borders.[5]

Fears that lawless Somalia may become a new safe haven for Al Qaeda are generating renewed Western interest in that country, largely ignored by the West since the ill-fated U.N. peace operation in Somalia closed in 1995. This revived interest and concern has collided with the troubling realization that little is known about the nature and extent of political Islam in contemporary Somalia. This article constitutes a first step in addressing that problem. It provides an overview of our current state of knowledge about the subject and assesses the Islamist movements in terms of their potential to threaten, or coexist with, Western security interests.

The thesis of this analysis is that most of the wide range of Islamic political activities and agendas present in Somalia can coexist with Western security concerns, but that two radical Islamist agendas inside Somalia constitute serious threats.

These are (1) the commitment to jihad against the Ethiopian government (embraced mainly by Somali Islamists with some external support) and (2) the commitment to a terrorist war against the West (embraced by a very small number of Somali and non-Somali radicals associated with Al Qaeda).

A collorary to this thesis is the argument that distinguishing between the "benign" and "malignant" strains of political Islam in Somalia is a difficult but vital first step in establishing successful security strategies in the Horn. Understating the threat runs the risk of overlooking a potential base of operations or safe haven for Al Qaeda. Overstating the threat runs the risk of alienating a great many Somali Muslims whose interests, agendas and allegiances can and should be kept quite separate from those of Al Qaeda.

ISLAMIC ACTIVISM AND IDENTITY IN SOMALIA

Historically, Islam has never succeeded as a sustained political rallying point in Somali society; it has never been able to overcome the more powerful organizing force of clannism.[6] In today's politically charged environment, various types of Islamist activism (Sharia courts, al-Ittihad cells) tend to be organized by clan and work within the parameters of clannism.

Islamist politics have been most powerful in Somalia when set in opposition to a foreign, non-Muslim threat (British colonialism, "Abyssinian imperialism"). Islam is in this sense a very important part of Somali ethnic identity, even among non-observant or secular Somalis, and can be used – and misused – as a tool of short-term mass mobilization, especially when served up as a cocktail mixed with xeno-

phobia. It also means that Islamist politics within Somali society is likely to be more potent where Somalis find themselves a weak minority in non-Somali lands – Kenya, Ethiopia and the diaspora in Europe and North America. Indeed, it has long been observed that Islamist activism among Somalis is more notable in Kenya and Ethiopia, where Somalis feel threatened or oppressed by secular or Christian regimes and societies. This same tendency has been observed among many other Muslims in the diaspora situated in Western Europe and North America as well as among other minorities all over the world.

As a corollary, one Somali clan – the Ogaden – happens to be concentrated in both northern Kenya and eastern Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, it is one of the clans more susceptible to Islamic militarism. This means that the trans-Jubba region (from the Jubba River to the Kenyan border), where the Ogaden clan has its only home area inside Somalia, is a territory that tends to host more than its share of Islamic activism, even though the actual practice of Islam among the relatively isolated Ogadeni is not as strict as is often the case with Somali clans enjoying more extensive links to the Gulf states.

Islam in Somalia has been a "veil lightly worn." Somalis (nearly all of whom are Sunni) have not been especially strict in their application of Islamic laws and mores. Women have traditionally not always veiled; clan customary law (*xeer*) and civil law have in the past superseded Sharia law, which was limited to family law; numerous pre-Islamic customs, such as veneration of ancestors as saints, continue to thrive; Somali political leadership has tended to be quite secular in orientation and lifestyle; and Somalis are not always scrupulous in following Islamic practices.[7] Somali pastoral life imbues the culture with a strong preference for pragmatism over ideology, not so much as a matter of choice, but as a matter of survival. To the extent that political Islam is embraced in the country, it too will tend to be more a result of pragmatic calculation than religious fervor. Insistence on very strict Islamic codes is often viewed as an imposition of Gulf Arab customs, seen by most Somalis as "un-Somali," and can quickly spark resentment. Somalis, despite the misfortunes of the past decade, still retain a strong sense of cultural pride.

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THE RISE OF AL-ITTIHAD IN THE 1990s

Contemporary political Islam began its ascent as an underground movement under the regime in the mid 1970s. It was fueled by several factors: anger at the repressive tactics of the Barre regime (including the execution of clerics who openly criticized the regime in 1976); disgust with the rampant government corruption; the failure of secular nationalist ideology to unite Somalis and overcome clannism; economic frustrations; and the large outflow of young educated males as migrant laborers

to the Gulf states (or students to Egypt), where they came in contact with activist Islamic groups and ideas. By the late 1980s, small circles of Islamic study groups and Muslim Brotherhood cells were active, especially in Mogadishu. As elsewhere in the Islamic world, these cells were typically composed of educated young men.

In the early years of state collapse and civil war, Islamists (initially organized under the banner of the Muslim Brotherhood, but later known as al-Ittihad) made several attempts to take direct control of territory. They tried and failed to hold the northeastern port town of Bosaso, where they were badly defeated by the Somalia Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) faction. They succeeded in gaining temporary control and management of seaports in Kismayo and Merka in 1991, where they earned high marks as relatively honest and effective stewards of international relief, in contrast to predatory factional militia. And in 1991, they captured and administered the commercial crossroad town of Luuq in Gedo region, holding it until 1996-97, when they were driven out by the Ethiopians.

The administration of Luuq under the Islamists is instructive.[8] An "Islamic Association" exercised overall authority, beneath which a Luuq district council, appointed by the Islamic Association, handled day-to-day management of the district. A Sharia court administered justice based on Islamic law rather than customary clan law (xeer); this meant that punishments included amputation, which is not at all customary in Somalia. The police force was composed of Islamic militia but kept separate from the security forces. Consumption of the popular, mild narcotic leaf *qaat* was forbidden, as was cultivation of tobacco. Women were forced to veil.

Free education was provided in the schools, but courses were taught in Arabic, and the curriculum was Islamic.

Most of the core leadership of the al-Ittihad in Luuq was from a local clan, the Marehan, but over time Luuq attracted al-Ittihad members from other clans. This proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it demonstrated al-Ittihad's commitment to overcoming clannism. On the other hand, the presence of outside clansmen was seized upon by the secular Marehan faction in the region, the Somali National Front (SNF), to claim that al-Ittihad was a "foreign front" taking control of Marehan land. This forced al-Ittihad into the awkward position of insisting that it was Marehan, even as it embraced the notion that its members "had no clan but Islam." Worse, because Luuq town and district are shared by other clans, the more al-Ittihad claimed it was Marehan, the more it alienated non-Marehan residents, who came to view al-Ittihad as just another manifestion of Marehan hegemony over them.

From a narrow law-and-order perspective, al-Ittihad in Luuq unquestionably provided a much safer environment than existed in almost any other region of Somalia during the turbulent and anarchic period of 1991-92. International agencies were able to work there, and some found the fundamentalists preferable to deal with – more professional, better able to maintain security, less likely to extort. The Luuq hospital, which was administered by al-Ittihad, was frequently cited as a model of good organization and accountability at a time when virtually all hospitals in Somalia were plagued by corruption and theft. A 1994 African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) annual report goes so far as to observe that,

for AMREF working in Luuq district, security is not a major issue – the district benefits from the good security, which is the result of strict administration by the Islamic Association. However, most implementing agencies working in other districts of Gedo still face problems of intimidation, kidnapping, theft and violence.[9]

Even the Kenyan military and police authorities at the border town of Mandera expressed a preference for al-Ittihad administration over the Somali National Movement (SNM) faction in the adjacent district of Bulo Hawa, noting that security always improved when al-Ittihad controlled the area. This external appreciation of the improved security provided by al-Ittihad was offset by profound discomfort with the Sharia code of punishments, treatment of women and other practices that were criticized as violations of human rights.

One of the most revealing aspects of al-Ittihad in Luuq (and more broadly, Gedo region) was its source of local support. The regionally dominant Marehan clan found itself in 1991 composed of two groups – one, the local inhabitants (the *guri*), and the other, newcomers or guests (*galti*) from Mogadishu and central Somalia, who were seeking safe haven in Gedo region during the civil war. The galti included many very powerful, wealthy ex-members of the Siyad Barre regime, and dominated the Marehan SNF faction. Resentment against the galti by Marehan clansmen native to Gedo region was palpable. This tended to manifest itself in strong support for al-Ittihad by the guri, which viewed al-Ittihad as a viable opposition force against the galti-dominated SNF. Divisions within the Marehan clan over al-Ittihad could by

no means be reduced to this guri-galti tension, but it was a significant factor. This anecdotal evidence reinforces the conclusion reached below that Somalis may gravitate towards al-Ittihad for a wide range of reasons, some based on eminently local and pragmatic motives, not global and ideological visions.

Documents from international aid agencies reveal that the Islamic authorities in Luuq were forced to deal with the same contentious clan issues as other types of administration and were not above clannish behavior themselves. The Islamist security forces were composed mainly of young gunmen, known locally as *jiri*, whose devotion to the tenets of fundamentalist Islam was negligible and who fought in the name of al-Ittihad only because al-Ittihad paid them. They engaged in extortion, threats and other misbehavior comparable to that of other gunmen in secular factions, and al-Ittihad was not always in a position to control them. Imposition of strict Sharia and the outlawing of *qaat* were not well-received by most residents. In the end, despite the appreciation many residents had for the peace and security al-Ittihad delivered, the public in Luuq did not resist the Ethiopian military offensive to drive al-Ittihad out in 1996.[10]

Most important, in Luuq there was strong evidence that non-Somali Islamists were providing support to the Islamic Association, giving rise to fears that Luuq would be used as a base from which transnational Islamic movements would attack the Ethiopian government. Sudanese and others were seen coming and going from Luuq. This was the issue that ultimately led the Ethiopians to attack Luuq.

AL-ITTIHAD POLICY SINCE THE MID-1990s

Al-Ittihad's failed attempts to maintain direct control over territory taught them two key lessons. First, holding major towns made them fixed targets for powerful external adversaries (principally Ethiopia) and was thus a flawed tactic. Second, holding fixed territory invariably meant controlling one clan's land or town, which made the multi-clan movement highly vulnerable to clannish charges of being an "occupying force" of "outsiders."

As a result, al-Ittihad adopted several tactics that defined most of their activities over the course of the latter half of the 1990s.

First, they concluded that clannish Somali society was not yet ready for Islamic rule and opted for a long-term strategy of educating and preparing Somali society, with emphasis on Islamic education. This strategy entailed the establishment or expansion of Islamic schools and relief centers. This was usually achieved through external Islamic aid agencies, which possessed the funding to provide quality schooling (in Arabic, and often with Egyptian teachers), free lunches and other benefits to local populations. The provision of services to desperately poor local communities won them local constituencies; Arabic language instruction was valued as a potential ticket out of Somalia to work in the Gulf. This tactic has made it very difficult to distinguish between those Islamic activists who are committed simply to a fairly apolitical agenda of deeper Islamization of Somali society (the agenda of the al-Islah movement, via Islamic aid agencies sponsored by the Saudi government) and those groups are using the Islamic NGOs and Islamic schools as a Trojan horse. The

fact that the Saudi and other externally-sponsored programs are not well-monitored by their donors makes it even harder to know when such NGOs have been infiltrated by groups with radical political agendas. Yet distinguishing between al-Islah and al-Ittihad is imperative, lest legitimate Islamic aid agencies become tarred with the same brush as al-Ittihad.[11]

Second, to avoid being targeted, al-Ittihad members chose to integrate into local communities. This has meant that coordination between al-Ittihad cells across clan lines has been weak. It is a mistake to think of al-Ittihad as a monolithic or centrally controlled movement in Somalia; at best, it possesses a thin level of central coordination reportedly held by known Islamist figures on a rotating basis. Members have generally stayed within their own clan areas; to defuse clannish suspicions, they often shave their beards; in the mid-1990s, they generally stayed out of local politics, often at the explicit request of local elders. Depending on their particular agendas, most have not been secretive about their affiliation, only discreet. In almost every town, communities know the mosque or mosques where Islamists tend to congregate, and the individuals associated with the "fundamentalists." However, it is also important to point out that it is difficult to discern the difference between very strict, devout Somali Muslims and political radicals. Somalis seeking to discredit rivals are also quick to spread rumors that certain individuals are "fundamentalists" even when they are not.

Third, where they have maintained a fixed physical base, al-Ittihad cells tend to be in strategically placed, but very isolated rural areas. In southern Somalia, for instance, al-Ittihad had until recently a

small base of operations in Ras Kiamboni, in a very isolated coastal area, enabling them to use boats to move people and supplies; and in El Waq, in the interior along the Kenyan border, where they could channel movement of goods and people into Ethiopia. In the north of Somalia, the remote mountain settlement of Las Qoreh was at times a center of al-Ittihad activities as well. Importantly, these small bases are now abandoned. A bombing campaign against these sites would be a pointless undertaking.

Fourth, to build up a power base, they have moved into commerce and have sought to recruit businessmen into their movements. The extent to which some members of the business community are sympathetic to, supportive of, tactically linked with, or firmly committed to al-Ittihad is a matter of debate, but it is clear that al-Ittihad members have moved successfully into commercial ventures in the country. Some remittance and tele-communications companies have been accused of close links to al-Ittihad, though firm evidence of these charges has been difficult to obtain. The U.S. decision to freeze the assets of the largest Somali remittance and telecom company, al-Barakaat, in October 2001 was based on claims that the company used to channel al-Qaeda funds. Somali money-transfer companies have transnational operations in the UAE, Nairobi, North America and Europe and are well-situated to move goods and money and to maintain extensive and undetected links with international contacts. It is unlikely that any more than a small fraction of the "business class" in Somalia is strongly affiliated with al-Ittihad, but it is difficult to know which business-men are active supporters and which are

funding a Sharia militia or associating with Islamists for short-term tactical reasons.

Fifth, al-Ittihad has learned to forge alliances of expedience with Somali secular political groupings, rather than opposing them outright. This has given them brief windows of opportunity to increase their activities and influence locally. These marriages of convenience are usually born of the logic "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." In Somalia, that typically means that a faction or other political grouping which finds itself in hostile relations with Ethiopia is more receptive to working with al-Ittihad to gain access to whatever external resources the movement may be in a position to secure. Faction leaders have been notoriously fickle on this score. The Mogadishu warlord Hussein Aideed (son of the late General Mohamed Farah Aideed, who fought U.S. and U.N. troops in 1993) has at times flirted with al-Ittihad (at which point the Ethiopians targeted him as a principal threat). Now, however, he loudly accuses the Transitional National Govern-ment (TNG) of being a front for radical Islamists (not surprisingly, Aideed and his faction are currently allies of Ethiopia).[12] Somali factional alliances and flirtations with al-Ittihad are extraordinarily duplici-tous, tactical and transient; they should not be given more weight than they deserve.

Finally, in some parts of Somalia, al-Ittihad has adopted what can loosely be called the "Turabi" strategy. That is, rather than making an outright bid for control over local administrations, they seek instead to gain control over key branches of that administration (such as the judiciary) while a secular authority presides over the administration as a whole. This allows them to promote an Islamic agenda and build a political base while staying off the

radar screen. Ideally, they hope to achieve what Hassan al Turabi succeeded in doing for a time in Sudan: gradually outmaneuvering a civilian government and indirectly controlling politics without ever claiming direct control of the administration. The most notable attempt to implement this strategy was in Puntland (in the northeast of Somalia), where Islamists succeeded in winning control over the Ministry of Justice even though the leadership of President Abdullahi Yusuf was strongly opposed to al-Ittihad. Concerns about the possible influence of al-Ittihad in the TNG in Mogadishu are based on the presumption that the same strategy is being applied there, though thus far al-Ittihad has not gained any significant portfolio in the TNG. Some observers feel the Islamists are more likely to infiltrate and eventually control, directly or indirectly, political structures established by others than attempt to establish such structures themselves.[13]

A related development in the latter half of the 1990s, and one which has complicated the picture of Islamist politics in Somalia still further, has been the rise (and fall) of local Sharia court systems across much of the country. The relationship between Sharia courts and al-Ittihad is complex. Most of the Sharia courts that have sprung up in the country since 1994 have been local responses to a lack of government and rule of law. They are controlled and funded by a local coalition of businessmen and clan elders and tend to have jurisdiction only within the clan's territory or neighborhood. They are relatively weak and vulnerable to collapse when their application of justice threatens the interests of warlords and free-militiamen. Local Islamic clerics with varying levels of knowledge of Sharia law apply justice. The Sharia courts are, in other words, little more than a reflection of a legitimate desire on the part of local communities to establish the rule of law; they have no political agenda beyond immediate local concerns about law and order. However, in some instances Sharia courts have been established or infiltrated by al-Ittihad. The Sharia courts and militia that until recently were based in Merka, for example, included members with more hard-line views. The Sharia court officials are sometimes sympathetic to al-Ittihad, even if not involved with them, and thus could serve as a future organizational base for al-Ittihad.

One religious movement in Somalia that must not be confused with political Islamism is the *tariqa* – Islamic brotherhoods or sects dating back to the nineteenth century in Somalia. The most common – *Saliya, Ahmadiyya* and *Qadiriya* – are tariqa found throughout the Islamic world. They have a history of being moderate in their religious views, thoroughly integrated into Somali culture, and sharply critical of radical Islamic movements. Greatly weakened by years of civil war, they nonetheless play an important social role at the local level in mediation, outreach centers for the poor, and networking opportunities for community leaders.[14]

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When in 1997 the business community in Mogadishu openly broke from the factional warlords and began funding a Sharia militia and court system to maintain security at the port, the major roads and the main markets, it was widely viewed as a local response to anarchy and not part of a broader move by al-Ittihad to take direct control over the capital city. Few of the leading businessmen were suspected of al-Ittihad connections, and the "Sharia militia" was mainly composed of recruits from clan militias. The allegiance of the young men in the Sharia militias to an Islamist agenda was weak; they would soldier for whoever was willing and able to pay their wages. It was widely believed that the businessmen were making a pragmatic decision to use the Sharia courts to manage security themselves and marginalize the warlords.

The subsequent move by those same leading businessmen to front the costs for the Arte conference and the establishment of a Transitional National Government in August 2000 was also interpreted in secular, not religious, terms. Even when the TNG received strong support from al-Ittihad and clerics in the Sharia courts, and when some al-Ittihad individuals were selected into the Parliament, there was little concern about the TNG coming under the influence or control of an Islamist agenda. The TNG leadership was well-known to external observers and understood to be committed to secular politics. The very weakness of the TNG – its inability to administer more than a small portion of Mogadishu a year after its creation – also tended to defuse worries about its being a Trojan horse for Islamic radicals. In the first test of the TNG's relationship with Islamists, the TNG resisted requests by Sharia-court leaders to give them the Ministry of Justice portfolio; instead, the Sharia militia was integrated into the police force and temporarily separated from the Sharia courts. There were ample criticisms of the TNG, but worries about its Islamist affiliations were not high on the list.

Concerns about Islamist influence in the TNG have grown over the past year, however. Those concerns have been most strongly articulated by Ethiopia. First, the TNG's leadership devoted most of its energies to courting aid from the Islamic world calling for an "Arab Marshall Plan," attending the world conference of Islamic parliaments in Tehran, and taking other actions signaling a strong shift toward an Islamic identity. This was generally interpreted as a pragmatic move to access foreign aid from the Gulf states, but it led to Ethiopian perceptions of the TNG as a possible front for radical Islamists. Second, observers now feel that the number of Islamist sympathizers in both the business community and in the TNG was underestimated, and that the TNG is split over the role of Islam. Some critics have argued that the open tensions within the TNG, which led to the replacement of Prime Minister Ali Khalif in October 2001, were fueled by differences of opinion between Ali Khalif and President Abdiqassim Salad over the administration's orientation toward the Islamic world and the role of al-Ittihad. This is not an entirely accurate read of the power struggle, but it is one that circulates. To date, the TNG has made it clear publicly that they condemn the terrorist attacks in the United States and have nothing to do with Islamic radicalism. For now, there is little evidence to doubt their position. The main concern with the TNG and Islamism is that the TNG and its

business supporters are so chronically desperate for external patronage and funding they will sign on to almost any patron's political or social agenda if it brings the TNG money.

A much greater concern than the TNG are changes in al-Ittihad's political agenda in the country since 1997 – specifically, a shift toward support of radical and external Islamic movements using the country as a base of operations. As early as 1993, there was anecdotal (and much exaggerated) evidence that the country was being used as a base for external Islamic radicalism, when Osama bin Laden was reportedly infuriated by the U.S.-led intervention there and provided aid to armed resistance to the U.N. Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) in Mogadishu. But it is in 1997 that there appears to have been a major policy shift driven by decisions made outside Somalia. That policy shift included use of Somalia as a base for external Islamic radicals, with an eye toward making the country a safe haven for terrorists engaged in activities outside the country. There is evidence that Somalia was a conduit for personnel and matériel in the terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in August 1998. And there is evidence that external Islamists have stepped up use of Somalia as a safe haven to carry out operations against Ethiopia. Add to this the increased activity of al-Ittihad in Puntland, recent anti-American, pro-Bin Laden protests in Mogadishu, and reports that at least one Somali diaspora member has been detained in connection with the terrorist attacks, and Islamist activities in Somalia clearly constitute reason for concern.

ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE

The difficulty lies not so much in accumulating this type of evidence but in interpreting its significance. Somali involvement with Islamist agendas runs a wide and shifting spectrum. Most Somalis feel a reflexive and passionate identification with Islamic causes and rhetoric, even if they are themselves not especially devout. Some Somalis are very devout and promote greater Islamization of society (al-Islah activities fall into this category) but are otherwise apolitical. Still others embrace aspects of political Islam, such as the expansion of Sharia courts to maintain law and order, but are uninterested in an Islamic state. Of those who support al-Ittihad, some view it as a tactical and short-term affiliation, others as a real commitment. Of those committed to al-Ittihad, most are concerned with an international rather than a domestic agenda. And even among those Somalis who want to harness al-Ittihad for violent acts abroad, most are primarily focused on waging jihad in Ethiopia. Somalis who actively support al-Ittihad as part of a global struggle are, by all accounts, very few in number. Notably, no Somali has appeared in leadership levels of Al Qaeda. The individual suspects the United States may identify in Somalia are likely to be no more than mid-level personalities in Al Qaeda. From that standpoint, Somalia poses a much lower threat than many other countries.

What this suggests is that even within al-Ittihad in Somalia there are significant differences of view over a wide range of issues. Those differences need to be understood if policies toward the movement are to be effective. When one considers the extremely fractious nature of Somali clannism, combined with the

schismatic tendencies of radical religious movements, it is reasonable to conclude that the Islamist movements in Somali society are and will continue to be plagued by constant divisions, internal tensions and differences in tactics.

One stark example of tactical differences has to do with how local al-Ittihad groups choose to respond to the activities of Western and U.N. aid agencies. In Gedo region, the local (Marehan clan) Islamists were quite eager to meet and work with external aid agencies and Western researchers, even to the point of enjoying cordial relations with European and American workers. After the U.S. embassy bombing in Nairobi in 1998, they tried to stress their local status and lack of links to external Islamists by renaming themselves the "Islamic Group of Gedo Region" and met with external agencies to promote good relations. By contrast, in Puntland, al-Ittihad has generally stayed aloof but has not actively interfered with Western aid operations.[15] In a dramatically different response, in the Lower and Middle Jubba regions, several Western aid workers and journalists have been injured or killed in assassinations by al-Ittihad over the past five years.

The diverse strategies and dispositions of al-Ittihad groups in Somalia mean that external observers must be extremely careful not to indulge in the simplifying but inaccurate algorithm which runs something like this: Al-Islah = al-Ittihad; al-Ittihad = Al Qaeda.

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NON-SOMALI ISLAMISTS IN SOMALIA

Non-Somali agents operating inside Somalia, however, are another matter. These fall into several different categories. One group consists of missionaries and educators, typically working in Islamic aid agencies and schools to promote Islamic values and behavior inside Somalia. This is mainly linked to the Saudi-sponsored al-Islah movement. Many Somalis do not like al-Islah's message of social conservatism and its views on women's rights, but to the extent that their legitimate religious outreach has a political agenda, it is long-term in nature and not of direct concern. There are also a small number of non-Somali Muslims living in the country for private, benign reasons – mainly conducting business, perhaps married to a Somali. A third group are non-Somali Muslims working with international aid agencies. A final group of non-Somali Muslims are individuals suspected of using Somalia as a safe haven from which to train and indoctrinate adherents, plan and organize operations, smuggle materiel, launder or divert money, and escape external observation. This is the scenario that most worries American security analysts. As the United States focuses more of its intelligence assets on Somalia, the degree to which non-Somali radicals are actually in place in the country will become clearer. At this time, there is little evidence suggesting that this is a significant threat.

It is difficult to come up with even rough estimates of the numbers of non-Somali Muslims in country. One source estimates that about 150 mainly Pakistanis and Arabs live in Hargeisa city alone. Estimates for Mogadishu are simply unavailable. In no locations, including Somaliland, do local authorities have the capacity to monitor these populations.

Unlike Afghanistan, where Arab and other Muslims serving in the *mujahedeen* were (generally) welcomed, Somalia is decidedly less welcoming for non-Somalis with ulterior political agendas, as external Islamic movements have learned or will soon learn. Local Somalis will insist that any foreign presence be linked to local benefits – jobs, contracts, cash payments. The more that local Somalis perceive that foreigners need them as a base, the harder the bargain they will negotiate (and renegotiate). Somalis and Arabs have mixed feelings about one another, and Somalis, always sensitive to slights and humiliation, often bristle at the paternalistic tone Arabs can take with them. Islamic cells will have the same difficulties faced by international aid agencies, finding themselves embroiled in local clan disputes, extortion, threats, cultural misunderstandings and other local intrigues.

SOMALI RESPONSE TO THE "WAR ON TERRORISM"

Initially, the Somali response to the war on terrorism was mixed. There were some street protests in support of Bin Laden, but nearly all political and community leaders have condemned the September 11 terrorist attacks and expressed a desire to assist the United States in tracking down terrorists. Debates in tea shops and on street corners appear to be framed by typically pragmatic Somali calculations of how their interests are affected, some arguing the country depends more on the Islamic world, others that the country is best served by continued links to the West. The fact that Islamic aid organizations are very active in Somalia, while the West has generally abandoned and ignored the country since 1995, is a worrisome reminder that an important long-term goal in the war on terrorism – winning the hearts and minds of local communities – is a game that the United States cannot win if it declines to play.

By late 2001, the war on terrorism entered a new, expanded phase, and Somalia found itself on a short list of countries likely to be the next targets of American military action. The freezing of al-Barakaat's assets in October 2001 created both outrage and panic in southern Somalia, where the company was most active. Somalis felt that their largest company was accorded no due process by the United States, which offered little direct evidence to support its claim that the company is linked to Al Qaeda. Intense and occasionally very inaccurrate media speculation that Somalia would be the next target in the war on terrrism, combined with American aerial surveillance, naval interdictions off the coast, and the coincidental release of the film *Black Hawk Down* has created a siege mentality in Mogadishu and a crisis of confidence. Anti-Western sentiment is fueled by frustration and fear that Somalia is being scapegoated.

Meanwhile, all major political groupings in the country continue to express public interest in partnering with the United States to apprehend terrorist suspects inside the country. These appeals are essentially driven by the hope of parleying anti-

terrorism into foreign aid. Two weeks after the terrorist attacks, the TNG declared the establishment of a "national anti-terrorism task force" intended to "design a comprehensive anti-terrorist national policy." Of course, since the TNG has yet to police its own capital city, the notion that it will combat terrorist cells in the country as a whole is not to be taken seriously. In reality, the "task force" is designed to attract international aid and recognition for the TNG. No doubt the members of the TNG see in the war on terrorism a new opportunity to attract external patronage. The line of argument already coming out of Mogadishu is that if the West wants to insure that no external terrorist cells operate inside Somalia, it must support a local authority that can police the country – namely, the TNG. Notably, political leadership in Puntland, Somaliland and the Somali Reconciliation and Restoration Council (a loose coalition of pro-Ethiopian, anti-TNG factions) are making similar appeals.

There are other ways Somali political actors will seek to exploit the war on terrorism to their own advantage. The most predictable tactic will be to discredit rivals by accusing them either of being al-Ittihad members or of being fronts for or puppets of al-Ittihad. Their hope will be that the United States and Ethiopia will provide them with support to eliminate this threat. Abdullahi Yusuf has engaged in this tactic against his Puntland rivals for some time now; Hussein Aideed is doing the same against the TNG. If external actors are not careful, they run the risk of being misled and manipulated by local power struggles and clan intrigues. Ethiopia itself has been a principal source of exaggerated claims of Islamic terrorism inside Somalia. It is hostile to the TNG and seeks to discredit it

by accusing it of being a Trojan horse for al-Ittihad. Ethiopia's antipathy toward the TNG is so great that unilateral Ethiopian action against the TNG under the banner of the war on terrrism cannot be ruled out.

CONCLUSION

Somalia will unquestionably earn considerable attention from the United States and the rest of the world as the war on terrorism expands beyond the immediate confines of Afghanistan. That Somalia could serve as an alternative base of operations for Al Qaeda is, on one level, self-evident. Somalia bears striking resemblance to Afghanistan in some ways. It is a collapsed state with only a few weak and scattered regional political authorities of any consequence. It is an Islamic society, deeply clannish and pastoral. It is overwhelmed by desperate levels of poverty, disease and underdevelopment. Its chronic insecurity has driven out most external aid organizations, journalists and others, making it an easy base for unmonitored operations. Some of its clan militias have shown themselves capable of directly and successfully opposing a superpower on Somali soil. Prudence alone dictates that Somalia be monitored carefully for heightened Al Qaeda activities there.

But the analysis presented in this study also suggests that, on a deeper level, Somalia is not an especially attractive location for Al Qaeda or similar radical networks. The highly fractious nature of Somali clannism, the politics of expediency and pragmatism that leads to so many broken alliances and betrayals, the overwhelming capacity of Somali communities to ensnare external actors in their local feuds, and the enormous difficulty of keeping secrets in a society that deals in

the currency of information all suggest that Somalia is hardly an ideal base for organizations with a desire for secrecy and control. A much more likely scenario is that Somalia will prove useful to Al Qaeda and others as a location for short-term projects – transshipment of people, goods and money in transit to other countries. Somalia could, in other words, play a niche role in a transnational division of labor for Islamic terrorist movements. Permanent Islamist cells are more likely to thrive in highly urban, multi-ethnic, corrupt and poorly policed settings where terrorists can blend in and buy off police and customs officials.

Meanwhile, the immediate key to an effective and informed policy in Somalia is recognition of the wide diversity of positions in its Islamist politics, and the wide range of positions even among Somali members of al-Ittihad. There can be little margin for error in assessing and responding to the many faces of political Islam in the Horn of Africa. A boilerplate approach that downplays these differences by viewing political Islam as monolithic is likely to produce policies that worsen Western security concerns in the region.

In the long term, enhanced security for both the West and the people of the Horn of Africa as a whole requires a much more serious and sustained effort to address the overwhelming crises of political and economic underdevelopment. One feature of many of the states that serve as safe havens for Islamic radicals – Afghanistan, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia – is that they are all failed economies, often little more than labor reserves for the affluent states of the Gulf and the West. Basic conditions are appalling. Outright famine is looming in parts of Somalia, and malnutrition levels are rising nationwide as purchasing power has collapsed in the wake of hyperinflation. Governance is weak to non-existent, meaning households live in situations of desperation. If the external world wants to protect and promote its own security interests, it must as a point of departure promote and protect the security interests of the region's inhabitants.

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[1] This is a revised and updated version of an article published by *Nouveux Mondes* (Switzerland). It is reprinted by permission.

[2] See Robert Gersony, "The Anguish of Northern Uganda" (Kampala: USAID, August 1997), and "Only One Solution to the ADF War," *Sunday Vision* (Kampala), January 23, 2000, p. 30.

[3] As was Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The U.S. embassy in Kampala, Uganda, was also targeted, but Ugandan and American law enforcement officers uncovered the plot.

[4] The micro-state of Djibouti is the obvious exception to this statement.

[5] The author was physically present in Mandera, Kenya, in August 1998, when Ethiopian forces pursued suspected Somali al-Ittihad members into Mandera. Ethiopia formally denies it has troops based inside Somalia, but U.N. and other aid workers routinely interact with Ethiopian officers in Bay and Bakool regions in southern Somalia, and Ethiopian forces patrol much of Gedo region (which borders both Ethiopia and Kenya) as well.

[6] Even the impressive "dervish resistance" waged against British and Italian colonialism in the early twentieth century by the heroic Somali figure Sayyid Mahammad Abdille Hassan was beset and weakened by clannism.

[7] See the many works of I. M. Lewis on this subject, including *A Modern History of Somalia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), and "Sufism in Somaliland: A Study in Tribal Islam, I and II," *Bulletin of Oriental and African Studies*, Vols. 1 and 2, 1957, pp. 145-65, 581-602. See also Lee V. Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), David Laitin and Said Samatar, *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), Mohamed Haji Mukhtar, "Islam in Somali History: Fact and Fiction," ed. Ali Jimale Ahmed, *The Invention of Somalia*, (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea

Press, 1995), pp. 1-27; and Enrico Cerulli, *Somalia: Scritti editi ed inediti*, 3 volumes (Rome: Istituto Polygrafico dello Stato, 1957, 1959, 1964).

[8] The following description of al-Ittihad in Luuq is adapted from a section of chapter four of Ken Menkhaus, "Gedo Region," (Nairobi: UNDOS, "Studies in Governance," No. 4, 1999. This information is derived mainly from the author's field work in the region in 1998.

[9] AMREF, "Annual Report of the Luuq District Health Programme," (Nairobi: AMREF, 1994).

[10] Roland Marchal, "An Overall View on the Political Situation in Gedo," unpublished report (1996).

[11] A strong case for this position is made in a forthcoming article by Andre Le Sage in "Prospects for Al Ittihad and Islamist Radicalism in Somalia" (tentative title), *Review of African Political Economy.*

[12] UN-IRIN, "Somalia: Aydiid Accuses TNG of Terrorist Links," September 26, 2001.

[13] See Le Sage, "Prospects for Al-Ittihad."

[14] For historical works on the Somali tariqa, see Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society*. For a recent exploration of their status in post-war Somalia, see Menkhaus, "Middle Jubba" (Nairobi: UNDOS, "Studies on Governance," 1999).

[15] One exception was in 1999, when a Somali Canadian working for an international organization was imprisoned by al-Ittihad sympathizers and threatened with execution for the alleged crime of speaking against the Quran.