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International Engagement with Somalia

Summary

- The Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006, supported by the U.S, had the unintentional consequence of fueling splinter insurgent groups including Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam.
- Currently Somalia faces a humanitarian crisis with 3.6 million people displaced.
- Countering the insurgency and alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Somalia demands a creative rethinking of international policy.
- While the 2008 Djibouti Accord created a more inclusive Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the international community must weigh whether continued support for the TFG will bring real progress in governance or if it will strengthen popular support for the insurgency.
- If the international community sees support for the TFG as beneficial, they could consider policies including:
 - Flooding Somalia with development aid and investing in civil society;
 - Expanding the African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission to include representation from other Muslim countries;
 - Finding creative solutions for inter-Somali governance and reconciliation.
- If the international community calculates that support for the TFG is not beneficial because it will only fuel the insurgency, they should consider a policy of “constructive disengagement,” withdrawing support from the TFG and the AU peacekeeping mission, while simultaneously investing in local and regional development projects.

“Many experts worry that the current situation in Somalia will contribute to the spread of transnational terrorism, will enable Somalia to become a safe haven for extremist groups and will make the waters off the Somali coast more vulnerable to piracy.”

In the wake of the foiled terrorist attack on December 25, 2009, there are growing fears that Somalia could become similar to Yemen in terms of its ability to serve as a training ground for extremists.

Somalia, like many areas in Yemen, is another case where the absence of government control presents a major concern for international policymakers. Many experts worry that the current situation in Somalia will contribute to the spread of transnational terrorism, will enable Somalia to become a safe haven for extremist groups and will make the waters off the Somali coast more vulnerable to piracy. Meanwhile the conflict in Somalia continues to displace millions. However, it is unclear how the international community should engage to alleviate the situation.

What are the United States and the international community’s goals for a Somalia policy, and what is the best way to achieve them? Specifically, will continued support for the Transitional

Federal Government (TFG) produce concrete improvements in their governing capacity or will it serve to only strengthen popular support for the insurgency?

To address these issues, the United States Institute of Peace held a public event to examine how current international policy is affecting the situation on the ground, and how different policy approaches could promote better governance and help to stabilize this highly volatile situation.

Bronwyn E. Bruton, from the Council on Foreign Relations, Abukar Arman, an independent policy analyst, presented their arguments, moderated by David R. Smock of the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Background

Somalia has been without a central government since 1991. Since that time there have been 14 different efforts to establish a new government. In 2004, the TFG was established with support from the international community to revive national government institutions and establish control over Mogadishu. However, the TFG has never had effective control over the whole country.

During this time the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) challenged the power of the TFG, establishing courts in the communities it controlled. Seeing the ICU as a threat, the Ethiopians invaded Somalia in 2006 with support from the U.S. While the invasion forced the ICU to flee and splinter, rather than quelling the insurgency, the invasion became a rallying point for splinter insurgent groups. In particular, two radical Islamist militant groups, the Al-Shabab and Hizbul Islam, have emerged as serious threats against the TFG. The Al-Shabab now controls roughly the southern half of the country and has established links with al-Qaida. What once was a small insurgency has become a national movement that has not only drawn support from within Somalia, but has sparked “home grown” radicalization in the U.S., Australia and Europe.

In late 2008, the Djibouti Accord was signed, and established a new, more inclusive TFG under the leadership of Sheik Sharif, a moderate Islamist. While the Ethiopians withdrew in early 2009, the government of Somalia continues to face serious threats from the radical Islamist groups. Moreover, it is likely that Eritrea has been providing financial support and arms supplies to the Al-Shabab, making Somalia the battleground for ongoing Ethiopian-Eritrean conflict.

Should the International Community Continue to Support the TFG?

While the panelists agreed that the U.S. military support for the 2006 Ethiopian invasion exacerbated the situation, it remains unclear how the international community should proceed or if the international community should continue to support the TFG and bolster its capacity to govern effectively.

The international community's broad goals for Somalia have been to:

- Prevent Somalia from becoming a safe haven for terrorists from Yemen and other neighboring countries;
- Prevent the spread of transnational terror;
- Prevent the radicalization of Somali youth;
- Protect military and commercial sea highways and prevent piracy;
- Monitor and stabilize the Horn of Africa and East African regions;
- Help create stability and security for the Somali population.

Yet, it is unclear whether supporting the TFG is the best way to achieve these goals. One argument, put forward by Abukar Arman, is that while the TFG has not yet demonstrated its power to govern effectively, supporting the TFG is the only logical way to help stabilize Somalia. There are a number of indications that support for the TFG could be effective this time around. First, it has become clear that Somalis are fed up with the continuous war and want to see real change. The protests against the Al-Shabab in the wake of the December 2009 bombing of a medical school graduation are representative of this shift and of the public's desire to put an end to the decades of violence. At the same time, the newly elected TFG has been gaining popular support. Sheik Sharif has become a popular figure both within Somalia and even among an extremely vocal and politically divided diaspora. Many Somalis are now trying to go back and assist the new government—allowing the flow of experts, technocrats and other highly trained Somalis to return and assist the government. The new TFG has also demonstrated its commitment to making the government provide much needed services to the Somali people—such as improvements in sanitation and access to medicine, Arman underscored. Whether it can provide these services is up for debate—but the international community should not cut off support for the one viable government entity that is gaining popular support.

However, according to Bronwyn Bruton, the U.S. response to support the TFG has not worked—and will not work in the future. U.S. policy is not working because the TFG is not capable of contributing to the international community's goals and, thus far, support for the TFG has been halfhearted at best. As it is still struggling for control over Mogadishu, the TFG does not have the power or governing capacity to provide basic services for the population, let alone help to prevent the spread of terrorism within its borders or to impose rule of law on the sea's highways. In fact, according to Bruton, U.S. attempts to prop up the TFG militarily have backfired, alienating a significant part of the Somali population and contributing to the current conflict that caused the displacement of 3.6 million people. These are conditions in which radicalization will only flourish. Moreover, the African Union peacekeeping troops do not have the supplies they need, such as food and munitions. While the goals of preventing terrorism are in line with the U.S. goals in Iraq and Afghanistan—in reality Somalia is not a priority for the U.S. and international community, and until it is, support to the TFG will not be enough, Bruton argued.

Potential International Engagement Alternatives

Whether or not the international community should support the TFG, it is clear that current international policy needs to reexamine how to address the devastating crisis now facing Somalia. There are a number of potential alternatives to armed intervention or exclusive military support that the international community could adopt.

According to Arman, the U.S. and international community should support the TFG, contingent on the unity government making reconciliation and elimination of the so-called "4.5" clan-based parliamentary system top priorities.

In addition to providing direct support to the TFG, Arman argues that there are a number of ways the international community could use "soft power" to promote stability in Somalia:

- *Focus on development and humanitarian assistance through Somali civil society*

According to Arman's argument, the international community should focus on humanitarian and development assistance, and "flood Somalia with food and medicine," and then empower civil society organizations to deliver these and other services, such as education, that would improve the quality of life for many Somalis.¹ To prevent corruption, a commission could be put in place to oversee the delivery of services and provide a backbone of organizational structure

and governance. The international community should also recognize Somali civil society groups—many of whom already promote inter-Somali dialogue—as a resource for reconciliation and empower them with training and funding to begin a reconciliation process rooted in Somali religious and cultural values.²

As a part of supporting the growing civil society, the international community can also help put incentives in place for skilled Somali diaspora to return to Somalia and contribute to the reconstruction process. While many diaspora are already trying to go back, they face a number of challenges and have little incentive to do so.

- *Support national disarmament and reconstruction*

While supporting the TFG, Arman suggests that the international community should also support a national disarmament program, offering training and small grants as incentives to turn in weapons, as well as begin a massive reconstruction project that will provide jobs and catalyze the development of sustainable government institutions.³

- *Expand peacekeeping forces*

At the same time that the international community is focusing on “soft power,” Arman suggests that the international community should urge the expansion of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeeping forces. Because the current AMISOM mission is perceived by many Somalis to be dominated by Ethiopia and simply an attempt to continue to Ethiopian occupation, the expanded AMISOM forces must include representation from other Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan to be seen as a legitimate peacekeeping operation.

- *Find creative solutions for inter-Somali governance and reconciliation*

Finally, Arman recommends finding a new solution to promote cooperation between Somalia and the two semi-autonomous regions of Somaliland and Puntland. One option could be to establish technical commissions on economic, social and reconciliation issues. These commissions could then decide how to distribute resources based on how they could best serve all three regions and therefore act as a bridge between the three entities. This would allow for the maintenance of separate “Somali” identities while also providing a venue for serious dialogue on the issues that remain essential to improving livelihoods and security in Somalia.

While Arman suggests that the international community should pursue these policies in coordination with the TFG, Bruton’s argument that the TFG is a non-viable institution suggests a much different international strategy:

- *“Constructive Disengagement”*

This term, coined by Ms. Bruton, refers to a strategy whereby the U.S. and international community would stop supporting the TFG in its fight for control over Mogadishu, and instead allow clan fiefdoms to regain control over their local communities, as they did in 2006. Bruton claims that while it is the common line that Somalia has been in a state of anarchy since 1991, this is not actually the case. In 2006, because of the strict security rules imposed by the ICU, the conflict had normalized and clan chiefs took advantage of the relative security to instead become businessman. As a result, these chiefs had a stake in maintaining a level of law and order so their goods could move from place to place. Moreover, during this time different clans made viable agreements over access to farmland, water and grazing. This moderate level of local governance led to real improvements to the lives of Somalis, and throughout this period al-Qaida was not a threat.

According to Bruton’s argument, the best thing the U.S. can do is strategically pull its support to the TFG and the AU peacekeeping mission, while simultaneously supporting local and regional development projects as a tool of reconciliation. In this scenario the international community would focus on helping grassroots communities to regain some control and prevent the spread of

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The United States Institute of Peace held a public event in December 2009 to examine how current international policy is affecting the situation in Somalia, and how different policy approaches could promote better governance and help to stabilize this highly volatile situation. Bronwyn E. Bruton, from the Council on Foreign Relations, Abukar Arman, an independent policy analyst, presented their arguments, moderated by David R. Smock of the U.S. Institute of Peace. Stephanie Schwartz, the author, is a senior program assistant with the Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution, which organized this event and coordinates USIP's Somalia work.

extremist ideologies. For example, international aid agencies could support development projects to build roads or wells between communities, and then facilitate the process of an achieving an agreement between the clans over usage rights. This will allow for the emergence of a moderate level of rule of law and local reconciliation while also providing tangible peace dividends to local communities.

Endnotes

1. Arman, Abukar. "A New Paradigm for Somalia." Huffington Post, December 29, 2009. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/abukar-arman/a-new-paradigm-for-engagi_b_406363.html (accessed January 6, 2009).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.



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