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Solving Somalia: A Complex Political Game

Civil war, terrorism and state collapse have made Somalia the Horn of Africa's most intractable security problem. Neighboring Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya are caught up in a complex political game of containment and unresolved history.

By Magnus Taylor for ISN

Terror in Uganda

On July 11 2010, three bombs exploded in two separate locations in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, killing seventy-four people who had packed into bars to watch the soccer World Cup final. Uganda's intelligence and security services arrested a number of individuals suspected of orchestrating the attacks in the following weeks, and two Ugandan nationals were convicted of organizing the bombings in September 2011.

Over the last three decades Uganda has been no stranger to political violence. This, however, was something different. The Somali Islamist group al-Shabaab, which has links to al-Qaeda, had recruited Ugandan Muslims to facilitate the murder of their own countrymen. This was an attempt to force the Ugandan government to withdraw troops that had recently been deployed in Somalia as part of an African Union (AU) peacekeeping force (AMISOM).

Multiple interventions

While Ugandans make up the bulk of the AMISOM mission, troops from Burundi, Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya (in addition to several hundred US and EU 'military advisers') are also deployed in Somalia. Bringing stability to Somalia increased after 9/11, with the United States regarding so-called 'failed states' as potential safe havens for Islamic extremists. Since then, Washington has avoided deploying American soldiers in Somalia and instead opted to fund AMISOM and conduct intelligence-gathering using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).

A sharp rise in maritime piracy also led to an upsurge in international efforts to bring a semblance of stability to Somalia. In 2008, for example, NATO launched Operation Ocean Shield to protect merchant vessels from pirate attacks off the Horn of Africa. More recently, the British Government hosted an international conference in London to discuss the future of Somalia's Western-backed Transitional Federal Government, whose mandate expires in August.

A history of violence

Somalia's problems have affected not only its long-suffering population, but also other regional players. The country has lacked a coherent central government since the overthrow of Siad Barre in 1991. Instead, regional clan leaders and warlords have fought each other, switched allegiances and fought each other again. Since then, international humanitarian operations have tried and failed to bring peace and stability to Somalia. The US-led Operation Restore Hope mission (intended to secure the distribution of emergency food aid) ended abruptly when US President Bill Clinton withdrew troops from Somalia. During this mission, the United States suffered a very public disaster when several US Marines were killed and dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. The US withdrawal put the cause of 'Liberal Interventionism' back several years, and as long-time commentator on the country Richard Dowden says, ['Somalia was left to stew.'](#)

The rise of the Islamists and 'Ethiopia's Iraq'

The security dynamics of Somalia began to change in the early 2000s with the [rise of the Islamic Courts Union](#) (ICU). This was a coalition of largely Mogadishu-based Islamic leaders who not only opposed Somalia's warlords but also formed their own legal institutions based upon *sharia* principles. The ICU had some success in restoring law and order to the streets of the capital and the south of the country. However, the onset of the 'War on Terror' ensured that this was an inauspicious moment to form an Islamist government. Fearing an upsurge in Islamist activities among the Somali population of eastern Ogaden, Ethiopia gained support from the United States to invade Somalia. At the time of the invasion, a Washington Post op-ed suggested that Somalia could become ['Ethiopia's Iraq.'](#)

Ethiopia and Somalia have a long history of conflict. In 1977, for example, the Ogaden region was one of the key battlegrounds of the Cold War in Africa, when US-backed Somali forces invaded Ethiopia with the intention of taking over the ethnically Somali region of the country. They were eventually beaten back by a combination of Soviet-backed Ethiopian and Cuban forces. The Ethiopians have never forgotten this act of Somali extra-territorial aggression and have sought to keep Somalia weak ever since.

In 2009, having broken one government and failed to replace it with a better one, [the Ethiopians withdrew from Somalia.](#) As a result, the AU assumed greater responsibility for trying to secure the country. Uganda and Burundi volunteered troops, a gesture that was met with approval by the West. This is an important consideration for leaders like Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, whose human rights record and questionable democratic credentials have attracted criticisms for several years. In the days of 'African solutions to African problems' – and with Western countries (particularly the US and UK) still in Iraq and Afghanistan -- such contributions were gratefully accepted, [and paid for,](#) by the US and European Union (EU).

Kenya joins in

An upsurge in violence and criminality beyond Somalia's borders prompted another round of foreign interventions. The most recent was led by Kenyan troops. Relations between Kenya and its ethnic Somali population have been tense since the 1960s after the country fought a combination of Somali secessionists and bandits during [the Shifta War](#). Kenyan Somalis live mostly in the country's north-east district – an arid and isolated region which hosts *Dadaab*, [one of the world's largest refugee camps](#). Thousands of Somalis have been living in the camp for years, having been displaced by fighting in their homeland. The Kenyan government has always been uncomfortable with this situation and fears that an unregulated flow of refugees will bring terrorists into the country.

Nairobi's decision to intervene in Somalia came after Western tourists were kidnapped on two separate occasions on Kenya's Lamu Island (more information on this subject is included in our coverage of [Kenya's 'Economic' Conflict with Al-Shabaab](#)). Nevertheless, the operation appears to

have been under consideration for quite some time. Kenya has considerable interest in [the creation of the LAPSETT corridor](#) – a communications route and port at Lamu that will connect the country's northern interior with the coast and East Africa's [new oil finds](#) (Uganda, Turkana and the more established South Sudan) to export markets.

But like the Ethiopians before them, the Kenyan military (which is much less battle-hardened) has found mounting a campaign in Somalia to be fraught with difficulties. However, al-Shabaab is now under real pressure from a reinforced AMISOM force in Mogadishu, further smaller incursions by Ethiopian forces and the 're-hatting' of Kenyan troops under the aegis of the AU mission (an indication that they might be there for some time to come). Although Mogadishu may be at its most secure since the ICU was in power, Somalia analysts such as Roland Marchal [warn](#) that the war is changing but is by no means coming to an end. Al-Shabaab is splintering, in both organization and geographical distribution. This could make the organization a more potent terrorist threat beyond Somalia's borders. So while Kenyan, Ugandan and Ethiopian incursions may result in a more stable Somalia, there is also a possibility that the military operations will heighten ethnic tensions and unrest in their own countries.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[A New Approach to Somalia: Briefing Ahead of the London Conference on Somalia - 23 February 2012](#)

[The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia](#)

[Somalia: An Opportunity that Should Not Be Missed](#)

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