

Endless war

a brief history of the Somali conflict

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Over the past two decades the nature of the Somali crisis and the international context within which it is occurring have been constantly changing. It has mutated from a civil war in the 1980s, through state collapse, clan factionalism and warlordism in the 1990s, to a globalized ideological conflict in the first decade of the new millennium.

In this time the international environment has also changed, from the end of the Cold War to the 'global war on terror', which impacts directly on the crisis and international responses to it. This poses a problem for Somalis and international actors working to build peace. Initiatives that may have appeared to offer a solution in earlier years may no longer be applicable and there is a risk of fighting yesterday's war or building yesterday's peace. This article traces the evolution of the Somali conflict and some of the continuities that run through it.

From Cold War to civil war 1988-91

The collapse of the Somali state was the consequence of a combination of internal and external factors. Externally there were the legacies of European colonialism that divided the Somali people into five states, the impact of Cold War politics in shoring up a predatory state, and the cumulative effect of wars with neighbouring states, most damagingly the 1977-78 Ogaden war with Ethiopia. Internally, there were contradictions between a centralized state authority, and a fractious kinship system and the Somali pastoral culture in which power is diffused.

Next came the Somali National Movement (SNM) formed in 1982 that drew its support from the Isaaq clan. The SNM insurgency escalated into a full-scale civil war in 1988 when it attacked government garrisons in Burco and Hargeisa. The government responded with a ferocious assault on the Isaaq clan, killing some 50,000 people and forcing 650,000 to flee to Ethiopia and Djibouti.

Somalia's collapse was hastened by the ending of the Cold War. As Somalia's strategic importance to the West declined, the

foreign aid that had sustained the state was withdrawn. Without the resources to maintain the system of patronage politics, Barre lost control of the country and the army. In January 1991 he was ousted from Mogadishu by forces of the United Somali Congress (USC) drawing support from the Hawiye clans in south central Somalia.

State collapse, clan war and famine 1991-92

Somalis use the word *burbur* ('catastrophe') to describe the period from December 1991 to March 1992, when the country was torn apart by clan-based warfare and factions plundered the remnants of the state and fought for control of rural and urban assets. Four months of fighting in Mogadishu alone in 1991 and 1992 killed an estimated 25,000 people, 1.5 million people fled the country, and at least 2 million were internally displaced.

In the midst of drought, the destruction of social and economic infrastructure, asset stripping, 'clan-cleansing' and the disruption of food supplies caused a famine in which an estimated 250,000 died. Those who suffered most came from the politically marginalized and poorly armed riverine and inter-riverine agro-pastoral communities in the south, who suffered waves of invasions from the better-armed militia from the major clans.

External responses to Somalia's collapse were belated because other wars in the Gulf and the Balkans commanded international attention. The Djibouti government tried unsuccessfully to broker a deal in June and July 1991. UN diplomatic engagement began only in early 1992, when a ceasefire was negotiated between the two main belligerents in Mogadishu, Ali Mahdi Mohamed and General Mohamed Farah Aideed. A limited UN peacekeeping mission – the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) – was unable to stem the violence or address the famine.

Signs that war was radically restructuring the state came in May 1991 when the SNM declared that the northern regions were seceding from the south to become the independent Republic of Somaliland (see box 1).

Humanitarian intervention

The Somali civil war erupted at a time of profound change in the international order, as global institutions, with the US at their helm, shaped up to managing an era of 'new wars' and 'failing states'. Somalia was to become a laboratory for a new form of engagement when the international community responded with a humanitarian and military intervention on an unprecedented scale.

In December 1992 the outgoing US administration authorized the deployment of US forces to support the beleaguered UN mission in Somalia. Under US leadership, UNOSOM mustered a multinational force of some 30,000 troops. Ostensibly launched for humanitarian reasons, the intervention also responded to the challenge that the collapsed Somali state posed to a supposed 'new world order', proclaimed by President George Bush at the end of the Cold War. UNOSOM dominated Somali politics for the next three years.

UNOSOM turned world attention to a neglected crisis and assisted in saving lives by securing food supplies. It facilitated some local agreements that improved security, reopened Mogadishu airport and seaport, and supported the revival of key services and the creation of local non-governmental organizations. It also provided employment and injected huge resources into the economy to the benefit of a new business class.

However, the mission failed to mediate an end to hostilities or disarm factions. UN-facilitated peace conferences in Addis Ababa in 1993 and Kenya in 1994 did not engender a process of national reconciliation and state revival. The mission has been criticized for fuelling the war economy, causing a proliferation of factions and shoring up warlord power structures. Before long UNOSOM itself became embroiled in the conflict with General Aideed, leading to the infamous shooting down of US Black Hawk helicopters in Mogadishu and the subsequent withdrawal of US forces.

Some argue that the seeds of militant Islamist movements were planted in this period. Osama bin Laden, then based in Sudan, denounced the UN mission as an invasion of a Muslim country.

Governance without government

UNOSOM's humiliating departure from Somalia was followed by international disengagement and a decline in foreign aid. Its departure in March 1995 did not lead to a revival of the civil war, however. Local political processes that had been 'frozen' by the intervention resumed and clans and factions consolidated the gains they had made during the war.

In some areas communities drew on traditional institutions, such as elders and customary law (*xeer*), to end violent confrontations, renegotiate relations between groups and establish local

Box 1

The Republic of Somaliland

On 18 May 1991, at the 'Grand Conference of Northern Clans' in the northern city of Burco, the SNM announced that the northern regions were withdrawing from the union with the south and reasserting their sovereign independence as the Republic of Somaliland.

The declaration, made under public pressure, has left a deep rift in Somali politics that has yet to be resolved. In 1991, however, the move insulated Somaliland from the war and famine in the south and enabled people to begin a process of reconstruction and statebuilding.

That process has not been easy. Between 1992 and 1996 Somaliland experienced two civil wars. Embargoes on imports of Somali livestock by Gulf countries, the return of refugees, urban drift, and contested territorial claims over the eastern regions have presented challenges.

Yet today Somaliland has all the attributes of a sovereign state with an elected government that provides security for its citizens, exercises control over its borders, manages some public assets, levies taxes, issues currency and formulates development policies. This has been achieved through the resourcefulness and resources of people in Somaliland and the diaspora, with minimal international assistance.

Acknowledgment of what has been achieved in Somaliland has been growing, but no country has formal diplomatic relations with it and it therefore has no international legal status or representation in international forums.

And yet a generation has grown up in Somaliland that knows no other country than the one they have been educated in, and no other government than the one that they are now able to vote for. Continuing international ambivalence over the status of Somaliland entrenches the vulnerability of the new state and ensures that it remains, in essence, a 'fragile state'.

Box 2

Puntland State of Somalia

In 1998 political leaders in northeast Somalia, frustrated at the lack of progress from internationally-mediated talks in Ethiopia and Egypt, decided to wait no longer for a national government to emerge.

A series of consultative conferences led to the creation of Puntland State of Somalia in August 1998, as a self-governing state in Somalia's north eastern regions. Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf, military leader of the SSDF, was selected as Puntland's first president. He later became president of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government.

As a non-secessionist state, Puntland epitomizes a 'building block' for a future federal Somali state within the 1990 state borders and was duly supported as such by the international community.

Puntland is a form of 'ethno-state', founded on the unity of the Harti clan. Along with the Majeerteen, this includes the Dhulbahante and Warsengeli clans of Sool and Eastern Sanaag regions over which Somaliland also claims sovereignty. The territorial dispute between Puntland and Somaliland has at times escalated into violent clashes and remains a deep fault line in Somali politics.

Puntland has experienced acute internal divisions and more recently has become internationally known as the home of Somali pirates. However it has remained a relatively stable polity and is in the process of reviewing its constitution and democratizing its political systems.

governance structures as a transitional step to developing public administrations and regional and trans-regional polities.

The most successful and sustained of these processes took place in the secessionist Somaliland state. Elsewhere, the Rahanweyn clans of Bay and Bakool region created a Governing Council to administer their regions. Although this did not survive for long after UNOSOM, it established a precedent for the decentralized administration of those regions.

In 1998 Puntland Federal State of Somalia was established in the northeast as an autonomously governed region (see box 2). In 1999 the Rahanweyn Resistance Army (RRA), with Ethiopian backing, won control of Bay and Bakool regions and also established an administration.

In southern Somalia a variety of institutions emerged, including two 'governments' in Mogadishu, councils of elders, district councils and *Shari'a* courts, which provided forms of 'governance without government'. While fragile and uncoordinated, these structures produced an incremental improvement in security, so that by the late 1990s the situation in much of Somalia was described as 'neither war nor peace'.

These developments were driven by a convergence of internal and external interests. There was an internal demand for security, regulation and order from businesspeople, civil society groups and people in the diaspora. This was underpinned by economic recovery, stimulated by diaspora remittances, and renewed inter-clan cooperation and the resumption of inter-regional trade.

Somalis took advantage of the lack of government and the global deregulation of trade to establish successful businesses, including money transfer and telecommunications. Their participation in *Salafi* commercial networks, and an increase in Islamic charitable funding, spurred the growth of Islamic organizations including welfare charities, *Shari'a* courts and Islamist movements.

Building blocks and regional initiatives

The disengagement from Somalia of Western governments resulted in the diplomatic initiative passing regional states and in particular Ethiopia. Addis Ababa's engagement was driven as much by geo-political, security and economic interests as by concern to end Somalia's political turmoil.

Ethiopia was especially concerned by the growth of an armed Islamist group in Somalia, Al Itihad Al Islamiya, with regional ambitions. Ethiopian forces attacked and destroyed Al Itihad camps in the border areas during 1997. At the same time, Ethiopia brought Somali factions together at Sodere and attempted to broker an agreement.

Egypt, Libya and Yemen and the Arab League also made endeavours to broker settlements, but reconciliation in Somalia was actively hindered by competition between these initiatives. After 1998 the breakdown in relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea gave a new impetus to the destabilization of Somalia. Eritrea supported Somali factions opposed to those aligned with Ethiopia, introducing a new element of proxy war to an already crowded arena.

In the late 1990s regional rivalries were reflected in different approaches to statebuilding. The model favoured by Ethiopia and briefly supported by Western donors was the so-called 'building-block' approach. Taking a lead from developments in Somaliland and Puntland, the RRA administration in Bay

and Bakool regions and an all-Hawiye peace conference in Beletweyn in 1999, the approach sought to encourage the emergence of regional authorities as a first step towards establishing a federal or confederal Somali state.

Donor and development organizations hoped to encourage the process by rewarding the areas of stability with 'peace dividends' of aid. Critics of the approach contended that it had limited applicability in the south, encouraged secessionism and was designed by foreign states to keep Somalia weak and divided. The alternative approach, supported by Arab countries, advocated reviving a centralized Somali state through a process of national reconciliation and the formation of a national government.

Competing regional interests led to rival peace conferences sponsored by Ethiopia in Sodere in 1996, and by Egypt in Cairo in 1997. These produced two regional administrations: the short-lived Benadir Administration supported by Egypt and Libya; and the government of Puntland Federal State of Somalia.

The Benadir Administration collapsed when its leadership failed to agree on modalities for reopening Mogadishu seaport, while in Puntland a combination of a community-driven political processes and strong leadership produced a functional administration.

Somalis were also divided over the right approach. As the multiple clan-based factions merged into larger regional and transregional polities in the late 1990s, they also mutated into broader political coalitions. One such coalition centred on Mogadishu and the sub-clans of the Hawiye clan-family. Although the Hawiye had failed to reconcile with each other and Mogadishu remained a divided city, but political, business, civic and religious leaders supported the revival of a strong central state in which they would dominate the capital. The other coalition, backed by Ethiopia and led by Puntland President, Abdullahi Yusuf, was dominated by the Darood clan, was anti-Islamist and favoured a federal state.

In 1999 international support for the building block approach ended when the government of Djibouti initiated a new national peace process.

The return of government

Arta process

International diplomatic efforts were re-energized in 2000 when the Djibouti government hosted the Somalia National Peace Conference in the town of Arta. The 'Arta process' achieved an important political breakthrough in August 2000 by producing a Transitional National Government (TNG) that commanded some national and international support.

This was due, in part, to an innovative peace process that consulted with Somali society beyond the usual faction leaders. It also adopted a system of fixed proportional representation of Somali clans in the conference and in government based on the so-called '4.5 formula': an equal number of places were allotted to each of the four major Somali clan-families, and a 'half place' to 'minorities' and to women.

The TNG became the first authority since the fall of Siyad Barre to fill Somalia's seat at the UN and regional bodies. It was supported by the UN and several Arab states but it failed to win the backing of Ethiopia or the confidence of major donor governments. In Somalia the TNG did not follow through on the reconciliation efforts begun in Arta and became associated with the powerful Mogadishu clans and the business class, which included Islamists. The TNG was opposed by a coalition supported by Ethiopia, called the Somali Restoration and Reconciliation Council (SRRC) in which Abdullahi Yusuf had a leadership role.

In the climate of international insecurity that followed the 9/11 attacks on the US, the failed state of Somalia attracted renewed interest as a potential haven and breeding ground for international terrorists. The TNG's reputation suffered as the growing influence of Islamic Courts and Islamic charities increased suspicions about its links with militant Islamists.

To some Somalis the return of government provided the best opportunity for Somalia for a decade, and they criticized Western governments for failing to adequately support it. The experience of TNG also demonstrated the difficulty of securing a lasting agreement in Somalia that does not address the interests and needs of both internal and external actors.

The IGAD initiative

The mandate of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was revised in 1996 to include the promotion of peace and security, in addition to fostering regional cooperation and economic development. IGAD had supported past Somali reconciliation efforts by Ethiopia or Djibouti.

In 2002 IGAD took up the challenge of reconciling the TNG and the SRRC, each supported by an IGAD member state. The influence of external actors was apparent during the two-year reconciliation conference facilitated by Kenya. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which succeeded the TNG in November 2004, saw Somalia's leadership shift from the Mogadishu-centred, Hawiye and Islamist dominated coalition to the federalist, Darood and Ethiopian backed coalition, with Abdullahi Yusuf chosen as the transitional president.

Substantial financial support for the TFG was anticipated with the inauguration of a World Bank and UNDP Joint Needs Assessment of the country's rehabilitation and development requirements. But like its predecessor the TFG fell short of being a government of national unity.

Power was concentrated in a narrow clan coalition and Abdullahi Yusuf was viewed as a client of Ethiopia. His immediate call for a military force from the African Union (AU) to help him establish his authority in the capital alienated his slender support base in Mogadishu. Without dogged international financial and military support the TFG would not have survived either its internal divisions or the rise of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006.

The Islamic Courts Union

An important feature of the past two decades has been the emergence of a variety of Islamist movements seeking to establish an Islamic state in Somalia. These range from traditionalist *sufi* orders, to progressive Islamist movements like *Al Islah*, and *Salafi* and *Wahhabi* inspired groups like *Al Itihad Al Islamiya* pursuing a regional or global agenda. Their significance came to the fore in April 2006 when a coalition of Islamic Courts, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), in alliance with other clan militia, ousted a coalition of warlords (the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter Terrorism) from Mogadishu that had been backed by the US government.

The ICU won public support for creating an unprecedented degree of security in the capital and quickly established a presence across most of south-central Somalia. It seemed to offer an alternative political system that could deliver services and security to the population, in sharp contrast to the failing authority of the TFG.

When mediation efforts by the Arab League failed to forge an agreement between the parties, Ethiopian forces, with implicit backing from Western governments, entered Somalia in December 2006. They forced out the ICU and installed the TFG in Mogadishu. The US air force attacked retreating ICU forces in an unsuccessful effort to kill Al Qaeda operatives allegedly harboured by the ICU. The ICU leadership took refuge in Eritrea where, with other opposition figures, they established the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somali (ARS) that mobilized support against the Ethiopian occupation.

In early 2007 a small contingent of AU peacekeepers (the AU Mission in Somalia – AMISOM) was deployed to Mogadishu to protect the Transitional Federal Institutions (TFIs). But over

the next two years efforts by the TFG and Ethiopia to impose a 'victor's peace' provoked violent resistance from a mixture of clan militia and remnants of the militant wing of the ICU – *Harakat al Shabaab* ('the youth movement').

During 2007 alone fighting between the TFG and the insurgency resulted in the displacement of up to 700,000 people from Mogadishu, and the economic base of the Hawiye in the city was weakened. The Ethiopian occupation rallied support to the resistance within Somalia and in the diaspora, helping to radicalize another generation of Somalis.

Djibouti talks

During his four years in power, Abdullahi Yusuf's government failed to implement any of the transitional tasks of government. By inviting Ethiopia to intervene militarily against the ICU, it lost all semblance of legitimacy and was unable to establish its authority over the country.

When UN-mediated talks between the ARS and the TFG in Djibouti agreed a timetable for Ethiopian withdrawal in late 2008, Abdullahi Yusuf resigned paving the way for the creation of a new TFG under the presidency of the former Chair of the ICU, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed.

The withdrawal of Ethiopian forces and the establishment of a new 'unitary' TFG created an opportunity to establish a moderate Islamist government in Somalia that had considerable backing from Somalis and the international community. Nine months later Somalia finds itself in even greater turmoil. Al Shabaab denounced the Djibouti agreement as a betrayal by the ARS. Under the leadership of Ahmed Godane, who is widely held responsible for organizing suicide bombs in Hargeisa and Bosasso in October 2008, Al Shabaab has declared its support for al Qaeda. The TFG has to date proved itself incapable of building a coalition to combat Al Shabaab and Hizbul Islamiya forces that control much of south central Somalia. The international community has responded by increasing support for the TFG, including the provision of arms by the US government.

The three years from 2006-08 were catastrophic for Somalis. Military occupation, a violent insurgency, rising *jihadism* and massive population displacement has reversed the incremental political and economic progress achieved by the late 1990s in south central Somalia. With 1.3 million people displaced by fighting since 2006, 3.6 million people in need of emergency food aid, and 60,000 Somalis a year fleeing the country, the people of south central Somalia face the worst humanitarian crisis since the early 1990s.