

## **Exploring a Comprehensive Stabilization, Reconstruction, and Counter-terrorism Strategy for Somalia**

Hearing before the Subcommittee on African Affairs  
The Committee on Foreign Relations  
United States Senate  
February 6, 2007

Testimony by Dr. Ken Menkhaus  
Professor, Political Science  
Davidson College

I would to thank the subcommittee members and Chairman Feingold for the opportunity to participate in this timely hearing on Somalia.

The task of crafting a comprehensive strategy for Somalia which harmonizes different, sometimes competing US policy priorities in the country will stand a much better chance of success if grounded in accurate analysis of the nature of both the crises and opportunities posed by Somalia. To that end, I have been asked by the subcommittee to provide a brief analysis of Somalia's recent political developments as a point of departure for discussions of US strategy toward Somalia.

### **The seismic changes of 2006**

After ten years of political paralysis and state collapse, Somalia experienced a dramatic series of political changes in 2006. These developments began with the establishment in February 2006 of a US-backed Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism in Mogadishu. That alliance brought together a group of rival militia and business leaders with whom the US government was partnering in an attempt to monitor terrorist activity in Mogadishu. US concern over possible misuse of Somalia as a safe haven for foreign al Qaeda terrorists focused on a small number of individuals implicated in the 1998 terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, as well as a bombing of a Mombasa resort in 2002 and a failed attempt to take down an Israeli chartered flight leaving Mombasa. Those "high value targets" were enjoying safe haven in Mogadishu under the protection of a small group of hardline Somali Islamists who held top positions in the umbrella group known at the time as the Supreme Council of Islamic Courts, later renamed the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC).

The establishment of the counter-terrorism alliance inadvertently triggered an extraordinary chain of events. The Islamists, alarmed at what they viewed as an Alliance set up to attack them, launched pre-emptive attacks against the Alliance militias. The four month war which ensued culminated in a decisive victory for the Islamists in June. The UIC quickly imposed effective control over Mogadishu, bringing dramatically improved rule of law to the city, earning a measure of "performance legitimacy" and enjoying

widespread support from Somalis both inside and out of the capital. By July, the UIC expanded its control across most of south-central Somalia, and emerged as the most powerful and popular political force in the country. Its principal rival, the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG), retained nominal control over the provisional capital Baidoa and some other regions in the hinterland, but was in a position of grave weakness and appeared vulnerable to internal collapse.

External actors, including the US government, urged the TFG and moderates within the UIC leadership to engage in political dialogue with the aim of creating a more inclusive transitional government which would be accepted in Mogadishu. Talks held in Khartoum yielded little, however, and tensions quickly arose. For their part, the TFG leadership appeared unwilling to engage in serious power-sharing discussions, and Ethiopia was unwilling to risk allowing the Islamists to use the TFG as a Trojan horse. Ethiopia increased its troop presence in and around Baidoa, inflaming the Islamists. As for the UIC, hardliners in the umbrella movement appeared intent on stoking hostilities with Ethiopia, in large part to mobilize support and marginalize moderates within the movement. Islamist hardliners such as Hassan Dahir Aweys repeatedly invoked jihad against Ethiopia, called for Ethiopians to rise up against the Meles regime, and made irredentist claims on Somali-inhabited territory in eastern Ethiopia. The UIC also forged close links to Ethiopia's rival Eritrea, and funneled arms to two armed insurgencies inside Ethiopia, the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. In the short term, the call for jihad against Ethiopia proved to be a very effective political tool for Aweys. By conflating Islamism, pan-Somali nationalism, and anti-Ethiopianism, he won broad support from Somalis at home and in the diaspora, including many who did not subscribe to the increasingly draconian Islamist rule imposed on residents of Mogadishu. In the long run the tactic bought Aweys and his supporters a disastrous war against sub-Saharan Africa's largest and most seasoned standing army.

The UIC's slide toward radicalization in the latter half of 2006 made war with Ethiopia likely if not inevitable, and eventually led many external observers to conclude that the many moderates in the UIC movement were too weak to redirect the movement's increasingly reckless policies. The position of the US government shifted toward greater emphasis on the UIC's alleged al Qaeda links and Ethiopia's legitimate security concerns, a signal that some observers construed as amounting to American "tacit support" of an Ethiopian offensive against the UIC. That Ethiopian offensive was launched in late December, and produced not only a decisive victory in initial battles in the open countryside but also an unexpected internal collapse of the UIC back in Mogadishu. There, hardliners were confronted with widespread defections by clan militias, businesspeople, and moderate Islamists. Local clan and business leaders also refused to allow the UIC to conduct a guerrilla war in Mogadishu, on the grounds that that would produce devastating loss of life and damage to property. Residual UIC forces and leaders, including an undisclosed number of foreign jihadists who had joined the UIC in 2006, were forced to flee southward to Kismayo, where they were again blocked by local residents from using the city as a base. The remnants of the UIC forces either melted back into Mogadishu, sought to cross the Kenyan border, or remained hidden in the inaccessible forested areas along the coastal Kenyan-Somali border area. At least two

aerial attacks were launched by American AC-130 gunships at convoys suspected of containing the three foreign al Qaeda suspects sought by the US. There is no evidence that those high value targets were hit in the attacks; US Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer reported that eight members of the Somali jihadist militia known as the *shabaab* were killed in one attack.

The UIC's sudden collapse led to the subsequent Ethiopian occupation of the capital and the arrival of the TFG leadership to the capital. Despite efforts by the TFG to create a police force and name a local administration, the capital quickly slid into lawlessness and armed criminality. Militia leaders deemed "warlords" by many Mogadishu residents returned to their neighborhoods and reclaimed their militias. By January 2007, armed attacks against Ethiopian forces and TFG installations increased, raising the specter of a complex insurgency by a loose combination of Islamists, warlords, armed criminals, and clan-based militias. Determined to avoid being drawn into a quagmire, Ethiopia announced intent to withdraw its forces within weeks and appealed to the African Union to send replacement protection forces into Somalia.

### **The current situation**

As of early February 2007, the situation in Somalia is precarious. Efforts to encourage the TFG leadership to engage in dialogue with Mogadishu-based leaders, including moderate elements of the dissolved UIC, have met with frustration. The TFG coalition remains narrow, and is deeply resented by most Mogadishu groups. Top TFG leaders appear committed to imposing an elusive victor's peace on Mogadishu. Armed attacks against TFG personnel and buildings are on the rise. Efforts to deploy an AMISOM (African Mission in Somalia) peace enforcement force to Somalia remain the subject of intensive diplomatic energies, but it is not yet clear that those forces will be mustered in a timely manner, if at all. Somali jihadists have issued threats to kill foreign peacekeepers should they be deployed.

The mood in Mogadishu is, by all accounts, weary, sullen, and angry. Anti-American sentiment is high. Rightly or wrongly, the US is held indirectly responsible for the collapse of public order in Mogadishu. Though most residents are said to be desperate for a return to rule of law and public order, most expect a return to wider violence. Those with the means have relocated their families abroad. The price of ammunition and small arms has shot up in local markets in anticipation of troubles.

The TFG has made almost no progress in providing improved public security or other government services in the capital. This record stands in stark contrast to the performance of the UIC administration, the standard against which the TFG is now being judged by impatient Mogadishu residents.

Ironically, the end result of the seismic changes of 2006 is to some extent a return to the *status quo ante bellum*. Somalia in early 2007 looks very much like Somalia of 2005, featuring a weak and unpopular TFG facing resistance from a loose coalition of clans, Islamists, and other interests in Mogadishu, in a context of de facto state collapse.

## **Assessment and analysis**

The best hope for Somalia at present is initiation of sustained political dialogue which yields a more inclusive transitional government – one which empowers and reassures key constituencies in Mogadishu and the rest of Somalia. Anything less than that will leave important segments of the Mogadishu population inclined to play the role of spoiler. To date, neither the TFG nor the loose coalition of interests in Mogadishu opposing the TFG have made genuine efforts to pursue political dialogue. The TFG leadership has embarked on a series of policies seemingly intended to alienate its rivals, including ill-advised and unfeasible calls for forcible disarmament of Mogadishu. Most Mogadishu opposition to the TFG appears intent on pursuing a strategy of making Mogadishu ungovernable as a means of blocking the TFG. The TFG's opponents do not need to defeat the TFG; they only need to play for a draw, prevent the TFG from extending an administration across key part of the country while waiting for the clock to run down on the TFG's remaining two and a half year mandate.

Every effort is being made to simultaneously promote reconciliation, muster and deploy African union peacekeepers, and generate funds and support to improve the governance capacity of the TFG. Ideally, these three goals will be advanced in tandem. But there are real dangers if they do not proceed in unison. In particular, if ANISOM forces are deployed and robust capacity-building measures are provided to the TFG in the absence of political dialogue, Mogadishu constituencies will view these external policies as a form of aggression against them, by empowering a government they reject. In that event, the African Union forces will either be subjected to attacks and kidnappings, or will be forced to pay protection money to local militias to insure their own safety – a practice that occurred frequently in the ill-fated UNOSOM operation of 1993-94. For this reason, promotion of political dialogue and other measures designed to make Mogadishu clans and constituencies stakeholders in the transitional government must be afforded top priority. Dialogue needs to be considered a precondition for, not a complement to, state-building and peacekeeping initiatives.

The TFG leadership has understandably made passionate appeals to the international community for substantial foreign aid to enable it to build an effective governmental capacity, and many sympathetic external observers have come to equate robust foreign aid to the TFG with commitment to state-building in Somalia. The relationship between foreign aid and state-building in Somalia is actually more complex. In the wrong circumstances, high levels of foreign aid has redirected the energies of political elites away from the onerous task of governance toward controlling and diverting foreign aid. It also tempts political leaders to use cash to play divide and rule, playing off and splitting rivals, rather than engaging in the more direct but more sustainable task of real reconciliation and power-sharing. It is worth noting that the three instances of impressive state-building in Somalia since 1991 – the secessionist state of Somaliland, the autonomous state of Puntland, and the UIC's six month administration of Mogadishu and surrounding areas – were all achieved with minimal external assistance. What this suggests is that external insistence on a few preconditions for foreign aid – real political

dialogue, and genuine efforts to begin basic government services -- is vital to ensure the success of the TFG.

In the event that AMISOM forces cannot be deployed in adequate numbers to replace the Ethiopian troops, the TFG is unlikely to maintain a meaningful presence in Mogadishu. Security incidents directed against the TFG will increase, and its leaders will pull back to the town of Baidoa or go on extended foreign trips. The result will be a divided Somalia and a paralyzed TFG. Recent actions and statements by Somali figures make this an unfortunate but increasingly likely scenario, one for which policy makers in the international community must develop contingency plans. A withdraw or collapse of the TFG need not coincide with a rise of armed conflict, though it may. External efforts to promote a “soft landing” in Mogadishu, assisting local authorities to revive at least some semblance of local governance structures from the past, would protect the capital from a free-fall into armed anarchy and might earn a small measure of goodwill from a Mogadishu population that harbors deep anger at the outside world – and the US in particular – for its perceived support of an Ethiopian offensive which destroyed a political order that brought public security to the city for the first time in fifteen years.

At present, the growing levels of armed violence in Mogadishu do not amount to an insurgency. The Ethiopian withdraw is depriving would be insurgents of their principal target, and the TFG is not enough of a threat to require an organized insurgency. The current violence is an admixture of armed criminality, sporadic clan-based resistance to the TFG, warlord adventurism, and Islamist resistance. Of these, the latter two will be most difficult to contain. The warlords have a vested interest in creating lawlessness and blocking the TFG; the Islamists have a vested interest in blocking the TFG before setting up their own administration again, at which point their alliance of convenience with the warlords will again turn into an armed rivalry.

The dissolution of the UIC as an organization should not be confused with the fate of political Islam in Somalia. Political Islam remains an ascendant and diverse movement in the country and will play a role in any future political dispensation in Somalia. Treating all Somali Islamists as radicals or al Qaeda associates would be a serious error.

The unexpected internal collapse of the UIC revealed deep fissures in the movement between moderates and radicals, and exposed the extent to which hardliners lost support of their core constituencies by pursuing confrontation and jihad with Ethiopia. The fact that business and clan leaders in Mogadishu insisted that the Islamists not wage a destructive insurgency in Mogadishu offers hope that Mogadishu-based groups are keen to protect investments there and avoid war, and may as a result be more open to dialogue. The failure of the hardline Islamists offers lessons about the fate of any political authority in Somalia that opts to embrace authoritarianism, concentrates power in the hands of a few, and is non-inclusive.

One of the most important questions emerging from the UIC’s collapse in December 2006 is whether and in what form the Islamist movement is likely to regroup. In the past, setbacks to Islamist movements in Somalia have led them to assimilate back into the local

community and remain a loose network of “alumni” until conditions improve. In current conditions, however, the worry is that remnants of the jihadist militia known as the *shabaab* will regroup in cells and launch terrorist attacks and assassination attempts both inside Somalia and against soft western targets in the region. It is impossible to know if many or any of these radicalized young *shabaab* members will engage in terrorist acts. But we have learned in Somalia that a small number of committed jihadists have the potential to produce an enormous amount of fear and instability.

Aside from a handful of warlords, state collapse is not in anyone’s best interest in Somalia. Most Somali households and businesses would obviously benefit from revived central government; Ethiopia and Kenya would prefer to have a moderate and functional government on their long borders with Somalia; and the US would prefer to have an effective government partner to monitor and prevent terrorist activities inside Somalia. But while state collapse is no one’s first choice for Somalia, it is almost everyone’s second choice. Ethiopia, the US, and many Somali businesses and political leaders have learned to cope with and adapt to a condition of state collapse in Somalia. This is dangerous, because it means that if efforts at reconciliation and state-building become too onerous or risky, many interested parties will be willing to walk away and allow Somalia to revert to a state of collapse.

This latter point has special implications for the subcommittee’s stated aim in this hearing, the promotion of a comprehensive strategy for Somalia. In the past, US counter-terrorism activities and its stated aim of promoting state-building in Somalia tended to be delinked and at times even worked at cross-purposes. Though calls to “deconflict” state-building and counter-terrorism policies were made, the two remained largely separate enterprises until recently. Since revival of an effective state authority in Somalia is an essential component of our long-term efforts to combat terrorism in the country, this really amounts to a tension between short-term versus long-term counter-terrorism measures. Our short-term measures – working through non-state actors to monitor and apprehend foreign terror suspects in Somalia – were questionable in their effectiveness, and in the process created incentives for militia leaders to block state-building efforts that would in effect put them out of business. If the TFG fails to consolidate control over Mogadishu, the US will again face worrisome short-term threats that the city could provide a safe haven for foreign terrorists, and will be tempted again to contract with local non-state partners in the capital. I would submit to the honorable members of the subcommittee that progress toward a comprehensive strategy for Somalia must find a way to resolve this tension between short-term and long-term counter-terrorism goals.