

Somalia: Distorting reality?

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The Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG) came into being in 2004 as the result of protracted negotiations conducted under the auspices of the Inter-governmental Authority for Development (IGAD). In many respects the TFG was the brainchild of Ethiopia, whose government had long decided that a resuscitated state in Somalia, which had been without an effective government since the fall of Siad Barre in 1991, would have to be kept weak or dependent in order to prevent it renewing its irredentist claims to the Ogaden regions of Ethiopia. The new president of the TFG was Abdullahi Yusuf, who had previously ruled the autonomous territory of Puntland, in north-east Somalia, with considerable Ethiopian military and financial assistance.

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A previous attempt to form a Somali administration had been made in Arta in 2000, sponsored by Djibouti and the Arab League. This had resulted in the formation of a Transitional National Government (TNG), which had never extended its rule effectively beyond Mogadishu, and found its pretences steadily undermined by Ethiopian backing for its domestic enemies. The TNG had also had recourse to Islamic courts in a vain attempt to shore up its dwindling power, and this provided Ethiopia with part of its pretext for its spoiling role, as Islamic militants under the banner of *al-Ittihad* had also threatened Ethiopian domestic security in the past. Elements of the largely Hawiye-clan based TNG can still be identified among the supporters of the Islamic courts of Mogadishu.

Disagreements within Abdullahi Yusuf's Darod clan-centred TFG over the location of the seat of government – Mogadishu having been deemed too politically hostile and physically dangerous – led to severe rifts in his camp, and certain of the TFG's Mogadishu warlords opposed the decision to locate the government temporarily in Baidoa, determining to make Mogadishu safe by their own efforts and thus promote their own interests within the TFG. Abdullahi Yusuf's pleas for foreign military assistance to allow him to establish a secure base for his government met with no more than a rhetorical response, even though the TFG had been recognised by the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN) and IGAD. These appeals also gave ammunition to the Islamic courts and their associated militias, which were able to depict Abdullahi Yusuf as a foreign pawn willing to bring infidel troops into the country to further his personal ends.

Beyond the Horn, the US had retained a surreptitious interest in Somalia, which it regarded as a 'failed state' unable to resist the efforts of *al Qaeda*'s associates seeking shelter. Washington had no intention of repeating the domestically damaging efforts that led to the killing of its troops in 1993, and sought instead to use proxies to carry out intelligence and snatch missions within Somalia. Some of these missions were launched from Ethiopia, which was keen to be of service to the US in its 'war against terror' and others from Kenya, with the connivance of certain Somali warlords. By February 2006, the Mogadishu warlords opposed to the Islamic court militias (and, to an extent, to Abdullahi Yusuf) had set themselves up as the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT). They were almost certainly receiving financial support from Washington, and allegations to this effect were being used effectively by the Islamic militias to discredit the warlords further in Somali eyes.

There is no doubt that the Islamic militias themselves were also receiving foreign assistance, from the Saudi peninsula but, more particularly, from Eritrea, which saw this as a way of discomfiting Ethiopia and of reinforcing Asmara's support for insurgent movements among the Ethiopian Oromo. All of this related to Eritrea's strategy of diverting Ethiopian forces away from their disputed mutual border.

By May 2006, the Islamic militias had routed the Mogadishu warlords, a development welcomed by Abdullahi Yusuf until he realised that the militias were expending their hold

rapidly beyond Mogadishu, and had seized Jowhar within days. He then paid a quick visit to Addis Ababa for consultations with his patrons, and by the middle of June a measure of consternation was also detectable in Washington, where efforts were made to pin down the ideological credentials of the Islamist militias, whose spokesmen had been at pains to emphasise their aversion to *al Qaeda* and similar violent movements.

At this stage, and with both sides apparently arming for a showdown, the Arab League intervened and brokered a temporary ceasefire in which, at a meeting in Khartoum on 22 June, the Islamic courts and the TFG recognised each other's existence and undertook to continue more substantive negotiations on 15 July. The agreement was welcomed widely, even in Washington, which presumably saw this as a way of drawing any militant radicalising the Islamic courts might harbour.

Within days, however, sudden developments within the Islamic court movement had created a new atmosphere of uncertainty, both for the TFG and for the international observers. The Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) convened a meeting of like-minded leaders from other clans and regions and reconstituted itself as a more broadly based grouping ominously titled 'The Somali Supreme Islamic Courts Council'. Though the 'moderate' spokesman for the UIC remained head of the new eight-man executive, the new body's 88-strong legislative council was headed by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, who for many years was prominent in *al-Ittihad* and since the early 1990s has been a sworn enemy of Abdullahi Yusuf, and is wanted in Washington in connection with terrorist acts. The relative powers of the legislature and executive of this new body were unclear.

This turn of events threw into question the 22 June agreement, since the UIC was now evidently setting itself up as a rival legislature, and alarmed Western governments and the Ethiopians, who now saw their worst fears realised.

Interpretation of events must wait upon developments on the ground. In the meantime, it is worth noting that viewing the world, and particularly so complex a part of it as Somalia, through an anti-terrorism lens is likely to cause distortions. A pessimist would argue that recent developments are all too likely to trigger an 'anti-terrorist' response that may well prove totally counterproductive, in that it will give comfort to those on both sides who seek to radicalise the situation and seek military rather than political solutions. An optimist would say that the victory of the Islamic militias in Mogadishu and their constitution of a countervailing force to the TFG might offer the possibility of agreements that would result in the reconstitution of the Somali state in a manner likely to be of benefit to the Somalis themselves.