



**ISS Seminar Report**  
**Somalia: Cutting the Gordian Knot**  
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The seminar attempted to shed some light on the current dynamics of the new crisis in Somalia. During the last seven months, since the Transitional Federal Unity Government of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed took office in Mogadishu, many events have shaped a new political dispensation in the stateless Horn of Africa nation: Sheikh Aweys returned to Somalia after years of exile, only to become the most dangerous spoiler in the reconciliation process but remains equally one of the most important political elements required to stabilize South/ Central regions; an Islamic party, Hizbul Islam was formed out of 4 armed Islamist movements; Al-Shabaab continued to conquer more territory and embarked on fiercer confrontations with the Sufi movement Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa; a major offensive was launched by a coalition of radical Islamist insurgents to topple the government; and international jihadis have begun reinforcing the ranks of insurgency.

At the same time, debates on how to rebuild the Somali State and what form it should take are occurring within the new government and other national circles. The constitutional process is considering the different types of institutional design and power distribution (federalism, a centralized state etc), while options for deciding which brand of Islam is to be implemented and how to conciliate Sharia with other laws are also being discussed. It was pointed out that the level of theorization, or lack thereof, of Islam is quite poor in Somalia given the reality that there are few Islamic scholars that could enrich the debate in addition to the fact that the movement is led by military men. On the other hand a self-radicalising movement like Al-Shabaab, that had apparently taken a very pragmatic approach to governing its conquered areas, has begun a process of talibanization where strict prohibitions are severely enforced by their moral police and any other form of public order is surpassed by the need to maintain the religious order. This process was termed 'menial obscurantism'.

On the political negotiation side, the possibilities for dialogue and the inclusion of actors taking place have already begun with Al-Shabaab, Hizbul Islam and even Sheikh Aweys. This development was implicitly expected to take place after Sheikh Sharif took office and would continue to implement the Djibouti peace agreement, effectively reducing the active role of the International Community in the reconciliation process. At this stage the new unity government would engage other actors that retained military, political and social power/influence, which would in addition to the insurgents include the Hawiye Council of Elders, the Diaspora, and civil society. Not only has this not

occurred, fueling the already fluid nature of political loyalties and accommodation, but since its inception the government is yet to produce one written policy document.

This seminar was part of the Somali Working Group initiative whose main objective is to address the knowledge and analysis gaps on the Somali region and to promote a knowledge-based approach to the development of policies and strategies to address the challenges facing the Somali region.