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Running out of Options – Reassessing Western Strategic Opportunities in Somalia

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In June 2006 Islamists belonging to the Islamic Courts Union of Sheikh Sahrif Sheikh Ahmed and Hassan Dahir Aweys seized control of Mogadishu and since expanded their control to areas adjacent to the former capital. In late September 2006 Islamists also took control of Kismayo further south and now control nearly entire southern Somalia. The Islamists stunning victory over an alliance of U.S. backed warlords has altered the political situation in Somalia nearly entirely. Three different parties now dominate the political landscape of Somalia and the international community has so far backed the weakest: the Transitional Federal Government (T.F.G.) of Abdullahi Yusuf, formed during a peace conference in Nairobi, Kenya from 2002 to 2004 under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The T.F.G. exerts virtually no control over any part of Somalia, apart from Baidoa, its temporary seat. Abdullahi Yusuf is the former leader of Puntland, a semi-autonomous state in the Northeast of the country. The other two power centres being the de facto independent and former British protectorate of Somaliland in the Northwest of the country and the Islamists of the Islamic Courts Union. The Islamists have only recently entered the political stage as a dominant political force but their appearance shattered the Somali political landscape. They have gained control of entire Mogadishu, something no warlord managed in the past fifteen years, reopened the airport and the port-facilities of the former capital and are exerting some sort of government. As some of the defeated warlords belonged to the T.F.G., the Islamists victory also crushed hopes that the Transitional Government could extend its authority to Mogadishu. With a crippled peace process and Islamism gaining momentum, the West should seriously reconsider its policy options in Somalia.

Foreign Peacekeepers to Somalia – Getting it Wrong

Since the Transitional Federal Government was formed in Nairobi and Eldoret, Kenya, the Kenyan government was pressing for its return to Somalia. In July 2005 the T.F.G. finally gave in to the mounting pressure and relocated to Somalia; it first took seat in Jowhar and later moved to Baidoa as the security situation in Mogadishu was considered being too volatile for an immediate return to the capital. Abdullahi Yusuf demanded that a 20.000 peace-keeping force should be deployed to Somalia alongside his cabinet, in order to strengthen his government, a move that not added to the legitimacy of his cabinet among ordinary Somalis. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) decided to dispatch a peacekeeping force to Somalia but although Uganda and Ethiopia declared their willingness to deploy the initial battalions no troops were ever deployed. Regional governments were very well aware that their troops would meet a hostile environment on the one hand, and questioned the need for a peacekeeping force on the other hand, as the T.F.G. was made up entirely of warlords, possessing enough weapons to guarantee safety when all members of the T.F.G. would live up to their commitments.

However, when the T.F.G. came under increasing military pressure from the Islamic Courts, IGAD repeated its willingness to deploy a peacekeeping force and for the first time defined conditions for the deployment. The most important one was the call for a power-sharing agreement between the Courts and the T.F.G., the anticipated outcome of talks held between the two parties in Khartoum under the auspices of the Arab League. However, a power-sharing agreement cannot be expected before October, when the parties convene for a third round of talks and a subsequent deployment of IGAD-troops is unlikely to take place before the end of this year. As Islamic militias are getting stronger with virtually every day, now controlling entire southern Somalia, foreign fighters already pouring into the country – fifty

Pakistani fighters reportedly left Pakistan for Somalia a couple of weeks ago to fight alongside the courts – and an unsuccessful assassination attempt on Abdullahi Yusuf on September 18 in Baidoa despite the unofficial presence of Ethiopian troops, it looks rather unlikely that the T.F.G. will manage to stay intact until the end of 2006.

The decision to send in peacekeepers comes not only at a time the collapse of the T.F.G. is already inevitable, it is also subject of ongoing friction within the regional body IGAD. Although the organisation decided to actually deploy peacekeeping forces in late August, an emergency meeting of the IGAD heads of states held on September 5 failed, as Djibouti and Eritrea did not attend and Uganda and Sudan sent only their foreign ministers. While the African countries within IGAD – Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia – are pressing for a peace mission, the Muslim members – Djibouti and Sudan – remain deeply sceptical about such a mission. Only the government of Eritrea rejects a peacekeeping mission totally, as it is backing the Islamists in Mogadishu to build a counterweight to Ethiopian influence with which it fought a bloody border war between 1998 and 2000, a conflict that still waits to be resolved. On September 6 the diplomatic impasse within the organisation reached an especially odd climax when Djibouti president Ismail Omar Guelleh met with Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, both warning that foreign interference in Somalia would have a destabilising influence, in what basically means that Iran wants its support for the Islamic Courts to go unchallenged; a message further directed against Ethiopia.

Somaliland – Cornerstone of a Western Strategy

Although the United States and her allies have established a maritime mission based in Djibouti to curtail the influence of the radical Islamists in Mogadishu and prevent potential spillovers, the history of western strategies for Somalia since state collapse in 1991, beginning with the disastrous United Nations intervention in the early 1990s, is a history of failure. Although the international community gave full support to the IGAD peace process and the United States backed secular warlords in their fight against the Islamists earlier this year, the peace process is facing collapse and anti-Americanism is reaching new heights in Mogadishu. In late August, the so called Contact Group, composed of the US, the UK, Italy, Sweden, Norway, and Tanzania adjusted its policy to the new situation by withdrawing full international recognition from the T.F.G. Although the need for a new strategy is quite obvious by now, so far no coherent policy framework has been put forward by any international stakeholder.

A couple of important steps can nevertheless easily be envisaged. The first and most important precondition for the success of any peace process in Somalia is the international recognition of the break-away republic of Somaliland in the northwest of the country. Somaliland declared its independence in May 1991 following the breakdown of Somali central order. It has since managed an impressive transition to democracy, reaching a climax with parliamentary elections in September 2005 that were considered being free and fair. Its consolidation of statehood, without any significant foreign assistance as should be noted, is since complete. Short of international recognition western governments, especially the United Kingdom and the United States have encouraged the government to continue its efforts, although fifteen years after independence was declared essentially no viable alternatives to recognition are left. Furthermore, Somaliland, as an Islamic country with a functioning democracy could be exactly the example western governments are looking for, in order to show that democracy and Islam are not necessarily contradicting concepts. In an effort to foster its international recognition the government of Hargeysa has applied for membership at the African Union (A.U.). At the 2006 African Union summit in Banjul, The Gambia, the issue of Somaliland was not officially on the agenda. Nonetheless, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zambia initiated a discussion between regional leaders on the sidelines of the conference, all coming out in favour of recognition. Western governments should now urge the A.U. to offer membership to the country as should

IGAD. Moreover some governments especially committed to regional security should be urged to grant recognition even if the A.U. does not offer membership in the near future. Western governments could then follow suit. By recognising the indigenous efforts western governments would send a strong signal into the Muslim communities and it would furthermore be an important step in containing the influence of radical Islamists.

A second cornerstone of a new strategy could be the adjustment of the rules of engagement of the international maritime mission at the Horn of Africa to allow it for an effective interception of weapons transfers to Somalia via Yemen. The 1992 United Nations arms embargo on Somalia has been a mirage ever since, regional players have supplied various factions with weapons, Ethiopia and Eritrea have even fought a proxy war in Somalia during their border war between 1998 and 2000. An adjustment of the maritime mission would increase the costs for continued low intensity warfare in Somalia and in doing so could also increase the costs for the spoiling of peace-processes initiated by international actors.

These steps would not lead to an end of conflict in Somalia, but they would certainly be a step forward. The rise of the Islamists in Somalia is a wake-up call for all in the western political establishments who have neglected the war-torn country for so long. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the Islamists mild rhetoric has so far been mere window dressing and that the present situation in Somalia has the potential of destabilising the whole region. There is, nonetheless, a chance to enhance regional security by containing the Islamists, recognising Somaliland and intercepting the arms influx. It is perhaps the last chance to avoid an African Taliban regime.

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