

The CIA: Back to Somalia

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AG - Gerard Prunier - Early this year a U.S. official announced that Washington was prepared to work with anyone who was willing to cooperate with it against al-Qaida. For the warlords, hungry for funds and keen to weaken the growing authority of the TFG and the UIC, this was a golden opportunity: They would do anything to prevent the restoration of order, whether Islamic or secular, which would end their extortion activities.

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The U.S. intelligence service, obsessed with the risk of Taliban infiltration in Somalia, inadvertently helped the Union of Islamic Courts seize power this past June.

The Strange CIA Coup in Somalia

Gerard Prunier

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Somalia suddenly hit the headlines this spring when its capital, Mogadishu, was captured by the forces of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC). After 1995 the world had mostly forgotten the country because of the failure of the United Nations' humanitarian and military efforts there in 1992-95.

Somalia has in principle had a government since October 2004: the transitional federal government (TFG). It was internationally recognised, but could not sit in Mogadishu, which was still in the hands of the warlords, so it was based initially at Nairobi in Kenya and later returned to Baidoa in Somalia.

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The TFG, established with difficulty after years of negotiations, was intended to fill the political gap created when civil war broke out after the fall of the dictator, Siad Barre, in 1991. Although the TFG is recognised abroad, it has never had any authority at home and is riven by personal differences between the president, Colonel Abdullahi Yussuf Ahmed, the prime minister, Ali Mohamed Gedi, and the speaker of the Somali parliament, Sharif Hassan Sheikh Adan.

The transitional government has no armed forces at its disposal, apart from the Majertine tribal militia based in Puntland. After the state collapsed in 1991, the warlords, who are leaders of armed tribal bands, took over and ruled the country until this June. That a number of them were appointed to ministerial posts in the new government did not change the situation.

With the help of mooryan (street children), many of them on drugs, they reduced Mogadishu and whole tracts of the country to terror-stricken anarchy. Their troops, on little or no pay, financed themselves through crime: theft, kidnapping, rape, armed robbery and murder. The warlords did very well out of drugs (especially the powerful euphoric qat), piracy, cattle rustling and the mobile phone business.

In these conditions of anarchy, a number of political groups with Islamic links established the first Islamic courts in 1996. They combined in 2002 to form the UIC, chaired by Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. Analysis of the tribal structure, an essential feature in Somalia, shows that members of the Hawiye and Habr Gidir tribes dominate most of the courts. This will probably create problems for the Islamic movement in the future because the Hawiye, although numerous, are divided and confined to central Somalia. Prime minister Gedi is a member of this tribe.

Until a couple of months ago the UIC was a politically disparate body in which moderate Muslims rubbed shoulders with both radical supporters of al-Qaida and ordinary businessmen worrying about their contracts.

Then, a major policy blunder by the United States opened the way for the UIC to seize power. The CIA saw Somalia as a potential Afghanistan. It had picked up a number of al-Qaida agents, including the Comorian, Fazul Abdallah Mohamed (who was the brains behind the 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam), Yemen-born Kenyan Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan and Sudanese Abu Talha al-Sudani, who were the joint organisers of the 2002 attacks on a Malindi hotel and on an Israeli charter aircraft off the coast of Kenya.

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In February, with the help of secret CIA funds, they established the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-terrorism (ARPCT). In theory, the ARPCT was supposed to pursue al-Qaida terrorists. In reality, it had its sights on the UIC. The militant Islamists were under no illusions and struck first, on 20 February. This was the start of a period of bloody strife in Mogadishu that lasted for three and a half months until the ARPCT warlords were finally defeated on 16 June.

There were warnings voiced within the United States about this strategy. David Shinn, who is a former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia and expert on the region, called for a broad approach, not focused exclusively on counter-terrorism, and Michael Zorick, a senior diplomat attached to the U.S. embassy in Kenya, protested in vain against payments to the warlords, which he judged counter-productive.

On 13 June, in a desperate attempt to put things right, Washington set up an ad hoc emergency body, the Somali Contact Group. Members of the group included, besides the United States, the Arab League, the African Union, the United Nations, the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD), Norway, the European Union and -- independently -- Britain, Sweden, Italy and, oddly enough, Tanzania.

But the contact group came too late, it was ill informed and it had no real decision-making powers. It looked more like an apology for previous absence than any practical instrument of policy.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that the Somali conflict had taken on an international dimension: two neighbouring states, Ethiopia and Eritrea, had become involved. They were already locked in their own long-standing struggle. The war of 1998-2000 had ended in an uncertain ceasefire, Addis Ababa and Asmara found it impossible to resume normal relations, and the conflict was still pursued in complex ways.

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Asmara, aware that Ethiopia supported Abdullahi, did its best to obstruct the TFG's activities: Eritrea supplied the UIC with weapons at least five times, not out of ideological sympathy (since the Asmara government has been resolutely secular) but on the principle that my enemy's enemy is my friend. Addis Ababa supported its champion, Abdullahi, from the outset.

Both naturally deny they are involved in the conflict in any way. Any such involvement is in breach of international law, since UN Security Council resolution 733 of 23 January 1992 imposed an embargo on deliveries of arms to Somalia, described as a "stateless country." The crisis spread beyond Africa: Saudi Arabia sent weapons to some warlords and the UIC, while Yemen and Egypt supplied the TFG with weaponry.

In an effort to keep going and assert its authority, the TFG played the international card for all it was worth. President Abdullahi had most to fear from his own "armed ministers" and he repeatedly called for armed intervention by IGAD or the African Union, to restore peace and uphold the rule of law.

He was right in principle, but in practice no one had the resources or the political will to tackle the situation in Somalia. Except for Ethiopia, which was keen to forestall moves by Eritrea and stifle any subversive intentions the UIC might harbour.

The slightest mention of troops from Somalia's traditional enemy, Ethiopia, was enough to spark violent political battles in the TFG. Also the African Union could not really call on Addis Ababa to help provide an intervention force, since Ethiopia was both judge and party in the dispute. It feared that any Somali government other than the government of its ally, Abdullahi, might renew Somalia's irredentist claims to the Ethiopian province of Ogaden, with its 4 million Somali inhabitants, which had already been the subject of a war between the two countries in 1977-78.

Faced with the UIC, the warlords collapsed within a few days in June. They were fiercely hated for their extortion and there was a sense of relief in the capital, although ordinary people wondered what to expect from their unusual liberators, the UIC militants.

The international community, anxious to preserve the marginal prospect of a return to normality offered by the TFG, immediately called for bilateral talks between the UIC and the TFG. This afforded another opportunity for internal conflict in the TFG, with Abdullahi seeking to avoid any

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accommodation with his enemies, and the speaker of the parliament, Sheikh Adan, insisting on a dialogue. The agreement finally signed at Khartoum in Sudan on 22 June was immediately broken by both parties.

The international press had erroneously reported that Taliban infiltration was rife in Somalia. These fears were based on such token gestures by the Islamic movement as a prohibition on watching any of the World Cup matches or an official order to cut the hair of any young people who wore punk, afro or rasta hair-dos.

The UIC was transformed into a Supreme Council of Islamic Courts and its moderate chairman, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, was replaced by an old militant fundamentalist, Hassan Dahir Aweys.

The two camps are still in conflict and it seems unlikely that they will agree to share power. But the Islamic movement, in the full flood of its success, has not yet faced up to the worst problem that bedevils Somali society: the tribal system, which had undermined Siad Barre's "socialism" and represents the major difference between Somalia and Afghanistan under the Taliban.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban enjoyed the strong support of its neighbour Pakistan and the Pashtun ethnic majority within the country. The UIC has no real friends outside the country, since Eritrea's support is opportunist, and the Hawiye are not Somalia's Pashtun. They represent barely 20% of the population and are subdivided into a number of tribes and sub-tribes.

And the UIC, unlike the Taliban, is subject to many tribal and ideological influences; there is no real indication that it is completely controlled by extremists close to al-Qaida.

So a subtle diplomatic approach is likely to have more success in preventing the crisis from escalating than are the projects for armed intervention currently under discussion in the IGAD and elsewhere. [Translated by Barbara Wilson]

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