

## Rethinking State-building in a Failed State

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As warships from a dozen nations patrol the waters off Somalia, trying to stem the piratical tide, the international community is once again trying to rebuild a centralized government in Mogadishu capable of dealing with the country's myriad woes. Today's efforts are only the latest in a long line of attempts by outsiders to build a national authority in the world's most anarchic country. Since 1991, the international community has launched at least fourteen peace initiatives in Somalia and spent more than \$8 billion on efforts to create a strong state.<sup>1</sup> All have failed.

The consequences of these failures have been dire, and they are worsening. In the past three years, fighting has displaced over a million people and decimated the capital. The country may be headed toward another famine, with nearly three million already dependent on precarious supplies of food aid.<sup>2</sup> Spreading lawlessness, a resurgent radical Islamist insurgency with growing links to al Qaeda, and blossoming anti-Western sentiment—not to mention hundreds of pirates—all suggest that Somalia is fast becoming the haven for terrorists and criminals that analysts have long feared.

The spillover effects are already reaching U.S. shores. The children of Somali immigrants to the United States are being radicalized by the conflict, and senior counterterrorism officials believe that several dozen youths have left the United States to fight in Somalia, including one who earned the horrific distinction in the fall of 2008 of being the first American suicide bomber. At least three more were killed in clashes in the summer of 2009, according to media reports.<sup>3</sup>

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Somalia is, in short, a nightmare for its own citizens and a source of grave concern for the rest of the world. Ironically, however, the international community bears much of the responsibility for creating the monster it now fears. Previous attempts to help Somalia have foundered because they have been driven by the international community's agenda, rather than by Somali realities. The UN, Western governments, and donors have tried repeatedly to build a strong central government—the kind of entity that they are most comfortable dealing with—in defiance of local sociopolitical dynamics and regional history. Not only have these ill-judged efforts met with inevitable failure, but they have also endangered the traditional social structures that have historically kept order.

Instead of repeatedly trying to foist a Western style top-down state structure on Somalia's deeply decentralized and fluid society, the international community needs to work with the country's long-standing traditional institutions to build a government from the bottom up. Such an approach might prove to be not only Somalia's salvation but also a blueprint for rescuing other similarly splintered states.

## **A History of State Failure**

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Somalia embodies one of postcolonial Africa's worst mismatches between conventional state structures and indigenous customs and institutions. The fact that Somalis share a common ethnicity, culture, language, and religion might seem to be an excellent basis for a cohesive polity, but in reality the Somali people are divided by clan affiliations, the most important component of their identity. Repeated attempts to impose a centralized bureaucratic governing structure have managed only to sever the state from the society that should have been its foundation, yielding what Eben Kaplan of the Council on Foreign Relations has characterized as “the very definition of a failed state.”<sup>4</sup>

The Somali population—some 13–14 million people, including Somalis living in neighboring states—is divided into four major clans and a number of minority groups. Each of these major clans consists of subclans and extended family networks that join or split in a fluid process of “constant decomposition and recomposition.”<sup>5</sup> Like tribal societies elsewhere in the greater Middle East, the clans use deeply ingrained customary law to govern their communities completely independent of modern state structures. Although somewhat weakened in the south from decades of urbanization, violence, and attempts to create a centralized state, these traditional groupings still hold immense influence over society.<sup>6</sup>

Since independence in 1960, Somalia's history has been punctuated by attempts to build a workable state in Mogadishu, followed by that state's division into feuding, kleptocratic factions, resulting in that state's demise. If anything, the authority and

cash that outsiders have repeatedly tried to give some central body have distorted traditional relationships, exacerbating interclan competition and helping to entrench warlords and their private armies.

Clans undermined elections and the state administration in the 1960s as well as the government of strongman Mohamed Siad Barre in the 1970s and 1980s. Barre progressively narrowed his power base until he depended on members of the Daarood subclans linked to him by birth or marriage to maintain power. He also propped up his highly centralized and repressive state with foreign aid, which accounted for an astounding 57 percent of annual gross national product.<sup>7</sup> During the last years of his government, Barre was confronted with no fewer than ten clan-based resistance movements, which began to carve up the country into autonomous fiefdoms. The Haarti grouping (a subset of the Daarood) created a semiautonomous region in the east called Puntland, while in the northeast the Isaaq clan led the effort to build Somaliland. Many other parts of Somalia have been similarly governed by local groupings, which have used the traditional governing system to resolve disputes and encourage some investment even in the absence of a formal state.

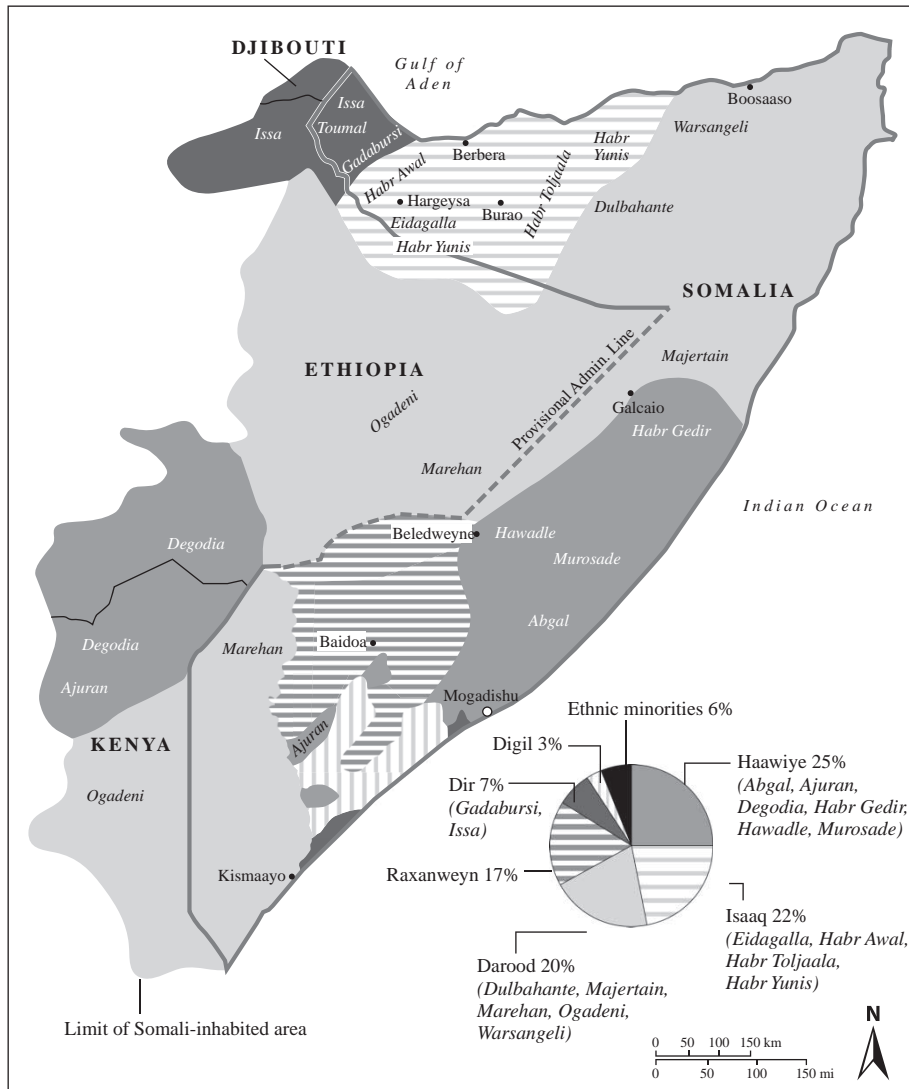
Among these regional entities, Somaliland has been the most successful, declaring itself independent and holding a series of free elections. Despite, or perhaps because of, a dearth of assistance from the international community, it has been able to construct a set of robust governing bodies rooted in traditional Somali concepts of governance by consultation and consent. By integrating traditional ways of governance—including customary norms, values, and relationships—within a modern state apparatus, Somaliland has achieved greater cohesion and legitimacy while, not coincidentally, creating greater room for competitive elections and public criticism than exists in most similarly endowed territories. It has held three consecutive competitive elections since 2001, has a parliament controlled by opposition parties, and has a vibrant economy dominated by the private sector.<sup>8</sup>

**Somalia is fast becoming the long-feared haven for terrorists and criminals.**

### **Yet Another Misconceived Intervention**

Since 1992, the United States and other international actors have repeatedly sought to rebuild the Somali state by bringing the country's various factions together inside a national government. The first such attempt was launched in the early 1990s, when U.S. troops successfully deterred Somali militias from stealing food aid, inspiring "mission creep" in the form of a campaign to disarm

## Map I: Somalia's Clan Demography<sup>9</sup>



those militias and push them into peace talks. A March 1993 UN resolution, mainly written by U.S. officials,<sup>10</sup> led to an overly ambitious attempt at national reconciliation and “nation building.” U.S. Department of State official David Shinn spoke of “basically re-creating a country” while then-U.S. ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright suggested that Somalia should be turned into a democracy.<sup>11</sup> The effort succeeded only in provoking resistance and culminated in the October 1993 Black Hawk Down incident, when eighteen U.S. soldiers were killed and between 700 and 1,500 Somalis died.<sup>12</sup> U.S. forces withdrew six

months later and all UN troops exited a year after that, having sustained significant casualties in a failed bid to foster a federal government.

With or without UN and U.S. support, many states—among them, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Italy, and Yemen—have since tried to bring Somalia's factions together. Various conferences aimed at promoting national reconciliation, disarmament, and elections have been convened. The 1993 Conference on National Reconciliation in Addis Ababa saw fifteen groups sign an agreement to work together, but fighting continued and the accord was never implemented. The 1997 National Salvation Council, organized by the seven-country Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), was boycotted by a number of key Somali groups. Representatives from twenty-five clans attended the December 1997 Cairo Peace Conference, but many factions rejected the results. A conference scheduled to be held in Baidoa in 1998 was postponed indefinitely and then cancelled. The 2000 Somalia National Peace Conference, the 2001 National Commission for Reconciliation and Property Settlement, and the 2002 Somali Reconciliation Conference similarly produced sparse results.

In the latest attempt to form a national government, the UN essentially established the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in 2004. Until Ethiopia invaded in 2006, however, the TFG never controlled more than a small area around one city near the Ethiopian border. Deeply divided, the TFG has no budget, no functioning civil service, and almost no control over the security forces that act in its name.<sup>13</sup> The TFG, nonetheless, is recognized by the international community as Somalia's legitimate government. (Ironically, not a single government recognizes Somaliland—despite its far greater success as a state.)

The TFG's powerlessness encouraged the explosive growth of Islamic groups in the southern part of Somalia. These eventually joined up, forming the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), an armed militia. The ICU expanded rapidly both because of an ability to supply a measure of order—something prized by residents weary of years of chaos and strife—and because it successfully co-opted various subclans by giving them significant stakes in local administrations. The ability to establish a decentralized governing paradigm that took advantage of Somalia's traditional social relationships gave the ICU important advantages over the TFG's centralized structure.

By the middle of 2006, the ICU controlled Mogadishu and most of south-central Somalia. The United States supported negotiations between the ICU and the TFG to create a power-sharing coalition, but hard-liners within the ICU pushed it along a more radical path. It incited Ethiopia by making irredentist claims on its territory, by hosting two insurgent groups opposed to Addis Ababa, and by expanding ties with Eritrea, which has a long-standing border dispute with Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> Ethiopia responded by invading in December 2006.

The United States had looked on with increasing concern in the closing months of 2006, especially because the hard-liners were led by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, head of the ICU's *shura* (consultation) council, whom Washington has designated as a terrorist. In the wake of the Ethiopian invasion, Washington decided to throw its full support behind the TFG, disbursing \$40 million in aid as a "down payment" in January 2007. Then-Assistant Secretary of State Jendayi Frazer called for a "broad-based national dialogue and providing appropriate development, security, and humanitarian assistance . . . to reach a sustainable political solution based on the framework of the Transitional Federal Charter."<sup>15</sup>

Although Ethiopia scored a quick military victory, as with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, chaos followed. Even though scattered after their defeat, the ICU and its Islamist leaders fought back via a guerrilla campaign, attacking the Ethiopian and TFG forces with remotely detonated bombs, ambushes, and suicide attacks.

**Much of the blame for this deepening nightmare can be placed on the international community.**

In October 2008, in an attack of unprecedented sophistication for Somalia, a coordinated string of five suicide bombers shattered the calm in parts of the country that had previously been outside of the range of Islamist forces.<sup>16</sup> The country ranks as the world's most dangerous place for humanitarian workers, accounting for nearly one-third of all casualties worldwide in the twelve months after June 2007.<sup>17</sup>

Ethiopian and TFG troops responded to deadly Islamist assaults by attacking entire neighborhoods, rounding up large numbers of innocent civilians, and raping and looting with apparent impunity. Not surprisingly, this behavior has radicalized thousands of Somalis. It has also stoked resentment toward the United States, which supported the Ethiopian invention both diplomatically and militarily, launching missile attacks on suspected terrorist targets. Centuries-old hostility between Ethiopians and Somalis has further exacerbated the situation, and made the feckless, Ethiopian-backed TFG even more unpopular than it was before. Despite the Somali tradition of religious moderation, hundreds of Somalis have become active members of the radical Islamist groups, and many thousands more offer passive support.<sup>18</sup>

International efforts to foster stability have mainly focused on pushing for a peace agreement between the TFG and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), an umbrella group consisting of opposition figures and Islamists. The United States has repeatedly backed these negotiations, regularly calling for "a government of national unity" and "the democratic transition envisaged in the Transitional Federal Charter."<sup>19</sup> U.S. development assistance is focused—as

in the past—on “supporting peace building and national reconciliation initiatives; building the capacity of governing institutions and civil society groups to support the establishment of a functioning national government; improving the delivery of social services; and meeting humanitarian and early recovery needs.”<sup>20</sup> But both the TFG and the ARS are far from cohesive, with various splinter groups pursuing their own agendas. Some elements of the ICU have regrouped under the name al-Shabaab (which means “the Youth” in Arabic) and resist the peace process, as do hard-liners within the TFG. The various armed militias, now run by commanders who act more and more like warlords, are not party to the talks. Members of the TFG and ARS did negotiate the “Djibouti agreement” in August 2008, which set a timetable for the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces and called for the UN to put together an international stabilization force. The agreement, however, was never likely to have much practical impact, given that those who signed it actually control very little territory.

Al-Shabaab and other Islamists steadily gobbled up territory in south-central Somalia even while the Ethiopian troops were in the country. After the Ethiopians left in January 2009, the Islamists moved into the capital. They are, however, by no means a cohesive group. Two years of fighting have fractured the once relatively unified Islamists, making it much harder to negotiate and implement any peace agreements, further undermining hopes of forming a national government. Ideological differences, moneymaking opportunities, and clan allegiances have fragmented the Islamists into ever-smaller entities, several of which have begun fighting each other now that their common enemy, Ethiopia, has exited the country. In December 2008, for instance, a newly militarized group declared “holy war” on al-Shabaab and killed more than ten of its fighters.<sup>21</sup> Another clash between rival factions in January left twenty-five dead.<sup>22</sup> In October 2009, rival Islamist factions fighting for control of the key port of Kismayo killed at least 12 people, most of them combatants.<sup>23</sup> Some factions have even beheaded a number of their own members for being “impure.”<sup>24</sup> As the battle for control of the country intensifies, the more extreme elements within the insurgency are drawing closer to al Qaeda. Such concerns prompted U.S. commandos to assassinate a key al Qaeda operative in a raid into Somalia in September 2009.<sup>25</sup>

The January 2009 election of Sharif Ahmed, a widely respected moderate Muslim leader from Mogadishu’s dominant Hawiye clan, as Somalia’s president by the TFG’s parliament-in-exile inspired hope that a unified front might be established to quell the Islamist insurgency. The Obama administration has offered unflinching support to Ahmed’s beleaguered transitional government, backing his efforts to create a national security force and helping to fund the undermanned African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission, although barely half

of the eight thousand peacekeeping troops originally promised by the AU have been sent, and Ahmed's forces control only a few blocks of urban real estate in a country the size of Texas. During a meeting with Ahmed in August 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton called him the "best hope" for stability in Somalia and announced that "President Obama and I want to expand and extend our support for the TFG."<sup>26</sup>

Clinton promised more aid, training, and equipment, in addition to the forty tons of munitions Washington sent the government in May, even though the *New York Times* reports that "his armed forces are like sieves. Many of his commanders still have ties to the Shabaab ... a large share of the American weapons quickly slipped into Shabaab hands."<sup>27</sup> Despite this support, violence has intensified in the months since Ahmed was elected. According to the UN envoy for Somalia, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, hundreds of foreign jihadists

**Attempts to impose a centralized governing structure have severed the state from society.**

have entered the country to train in local camps and swell the ranks of al Shabab's fighters.<sup>28</sup> In August 2009, five men allegedly linked to al Shabab were charged in Australia with plotting a suicide attack on an army barracks near Sydney.<sup>29</sup> "[There is] no doubt that Al Shabab wants to obtain control over Somalia and use it as a base to influence and infiltrate surrounding countries," Clinton said in August. "If Al Shabab were to obtain a haven in Somalia

which could then attract al Qaeda and other terrorist actors, it would be a threat to the United States."<sup>30</sup>

Yet, at present at least, al Shabab seems too weak to topple the TFG. Indeed, according to the *New York Times*, none of the numerous factions seems "powerful enough, organized enough or popular enough to overpower the other contenders and end the violence."<sup>31</sup> The inability of any group to unify the various factions or create even a semblance of stability in any part of the south has inspired "a general and frantic retreat of individuals to their sub-clan affiliations."<sup>32</sup> With the Ethiopians gone and the undersized AU peacekeeping force barely able to defend itself, the stage is set for an intensification of violence as myriad subclans and Islamic groups battle for control of bits of territory.

Life for ordinary Somalis will grow even worse. Already, they are among the world's poorest and hungriest people, with an adult literacy rate that may be lower than 20 percent in some parts of the country, an average life expectancy of only 42 years, and a mortality rate for children under five that exceeds 25 percent.<sup>33</sup>

## A New Approach

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Much of the blame for this deepening nightmare can be placed on the international community. Its unimaginative approach to state-building seriously misreads the Somali sociopolitical context, showing little understanding for how a top-down strategy impacts the state's fluid, fragmented, and decentralized clan structures. To make matters worse, the mistakes of the past are constantly being repeated, thanks to weak institutional memory (made worse by high turnover in embassies, aid agencies, and international organizations within the region); an unimaginative, uncritical, and template-driven approach to state-building; and a lack of accountability on the part of external donors, defense agencies, and aid organizations for the consequences of their failed policies.<sup>34</sup>

Somalia calls out for a new approach to state-building, one that takes fully into account a country's indigenous social fabric and institutions, and that attempts to build from the bottom up, integrating communal ways of working together into state structures. Much of Somaliland's success can be traced to its ability to build governing bodies that are rooted in traditional and widely accepted Somali norms, values, and relationships. The ICU's rapid expansion likewise owed much to its readiness to cooperate with indigenous institutions, which made many local groups willing to work with it despite a dislike for many of the religious norms it sought to enforce. The post-1991 anarchy has, in fact, seen several examples of autonomous substate self-governance, where clan-based coalitions have managed to exert a degree of authority over certain regions. Working administrations and stability were established first in Somaliland, then in Puntland, Southwestern Somalia, Jubaland (in the south), and most recently in Galmudug (in the center). Except for secessionist Somaliland, all these areas indicated an eagerness to be part of a federal Somalia.

The international community should abandon its attempts to impose a top-down, centralized, and profoundly artificial state model and begin to work with, rather than against, the grain of Somali society. Clans have helped destroy Somalia's centralized governments, but they can be instrumental in helping rebuild national governance from the bottom up.

The international community should work directly with the clans and subclans, helping them build a series of regional governments patterned after those now operating in Somaliland and Puntland, and that have operated from time to time elsewhere. These entities could, if given some international support, serve almost all of their populations' day-to-day needs—in education, in healthcare, in policing, and in resolving business and family disputes. Regional governments could also acquire vital popular legitimacy if they incorporate customary forms of governance into formal governing bodies—as Somaliland has

done with its upper house of elders and its use of clan-based dispute-resolution mechanisms.

A central government should be retained, but its functions should be strictly limited in scope and its institutions in number. The central government should, for example, manage a common currency, offer a structure for negotiating clan disagreements (especially over land and resources), and provide a platform for clan representatives to work together to reach consensus on major foreign policy issues and national infrastructure projects. Outsiders could play a long-term role as arbitrators and underwriters to ensure that the most toxic interclan relationships do not poison the few national-level institutions.

Foreign assistance to the central state should focus on supporting these few institutions, not on building a functioning bureaucracy and electoral democracy. As state institutions mature over time and the working relationship among clans improves, more regulatory powers should be established at the center. The great majority of international assistance, however, should be directed at the local

**The lesson is not that the country should be left to stew in its own problems.**

level, where the chances of bringing peace, stable administration, and the benefits of development are likely to be greatest.<sup>35</sup>

Such assistance could be conditioned on each regional government's commitment to manage foreign aid transparently and its readiness to expel terrorists, pirates, and organized criminals.<sup>36</sup> This would, among other things, give donors more leverage over the groups that actually control most

of the country's territory and help prevent any backsliding on progress already made, as has happened to some degree in Somaliland, with the recent postponement of presidential elections.

This confederate structure would be distinctive, but not entirely historically unprecedented. For instance, in some ways it would resemble the Old Swiss Confederacy that maintained the peace and managed trade among cantons for several hundred years. In terms of its power, the national government in Mogadishu would be less well endowed than the pre-Civil War federal government in Washington.

This approach is not without its challenges. Somalis themselves are divided between nationalists seeking a more centralized approach and federalists looking for significant regional autonomy. The intermixing of clans in parts of the south due to migration means that any clan-based state model would have to be tailored to local conditions and equipped with safeguards to protect members of minority groups.<sup>37</sup> Disputes over where to draw boundaries between political units, especially where they overlap with valuable real estate, such as the airports

and seaports that produce customs duties, and possible mineral deposits, such as oil and gas, could also provoke violence in the absence of revenue-sharing arrangements. Without adequate external support at crucial moments in their development, small, semi-independent regional and local governments would be vulnerable to the intrigues of more powerful warlords, politicians, and clans. A federal solution is also opposed on the grounds that only a strong central government will be able to prevent the balkanization of the country, keep Ethiopia from interfering in Somalia's internal affairs, maintain the peace between competing clans, and promote national economic development and well-being.

Such objections, however, run into the same pair of problems. First, in Somalia, as across most of the developing world, external actors have repeatedly demonstrated that they are unable or unwilling to invest the required political, economic, and military resources for the length of time necessary to nurture a central government that enjoys nationwide support and can project its authority throughout the country. Second, the strength of a government is proportional to the degree of social cohesion among its citizens and to their readiness to divide national resources equitably. Somalia's clans are highly cohesive internally but highly divisive externally. In other words, social cohesion exists within clans but not between them. And each clan has little or no interest in sharing the resources it controls with other clans. The record of the past eighteen years suggests that it may in fact be getting harder to build a strong central government because the violence has made divisions between groups more stark while increasing levels of mutual distrust.

A program of autonomous self-government, however, does not depend for its success on historically unprecedented levels of international largesse and Somali social cohesion. To the contrary, such a program could be implemented in a few regions—such as Somaliland, Puntland, and Galmudug—right away, and as outside assistance helped these areas improve their public services and economies, other regions would seek to join them. Offering to empower subclans or independent factions in this way would give local leaders—including warlords and moderate Islamists in some places—an incentive to participate in government. Strengthening traditional structures would give local administrations the capacity to maintain order and foster progress within their boundaries. And if international aid was redirected to the local level, outside actors would have a far better chance of ensuring that disputes over territory, revenue, and the rights of migrants were settled amicably. Over time, greater trade, education, urbanization, and wealth would break down the barriers between clans while transforming traditional systems of governance into more Westernized forms, but such a process would be internally driven and shaped by the needs of the local population, not those of the international community.

## U.S. Policy

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Almost two decades of misguided interventionism has done nothing to improve the situation within Somalia. Yet, the lesson that U.S. policymakers should draw from past failures is not that the country should be left to stew in its own problems. The Somali pirates who prey on international shipping and the terrorists who find havens in the country's anarchy should give pause to anyone who argues that neglect of failed and fragile states is an acceptable policy for the United States. Past failures should be seen as an opportunity to engage the country in a different, more productive fashion. The Obama administration has the chance to adopt a more creative strategy, one that is more multifaceted and better grounded in the realities of the country. Taking advantage of indigenous capacities and social ties should form the central plank of this new approach.

**A central government should be retained, but its functions should be strictly limited.**

In the short term, the new administration should prioritize humanitarian relief, working to ensure that food and other supplies reach their intended Somali recipients—something that has been far from easy in the recent past. A successful effort to accomplish this would help dissipate some of the anti-American sentiment that has built up within the country.

In the medium term, Washington should seek, in conjunction with other members of the international community, to implement the program of regionally-based government proposed above. A four-pronged approach might be most productive: One, provide military, financial, and political support to the existing clan-based regional governments, seeking to buttress them so they can administer their territories more effectively and provide better services. Two, spur the establishment of new regional governments by offering a generous package of assistance to such entities. Three, encourage moderate Islamic groups to participate in this plan as long as they can garner sufficient local support in the area they control and are willing to prevent terrorists and pirates from using their territory. Four, help establish a modest national superstructure of governance to deal with national and interclan issues.

This approach will not only strengthen the regional governments but also help to isolate and weaken the more radical Islamist groups. The willing recruits the Islamists currently enlist will surely dwindle in number if economic opportunities for young men increase while criminal activities are better policed. Equally, if clans are given the weapons and training with which to repel attacks by Islamist groups, then the latter's attractiveness to malcontents

will surely diminish. Any measure that strengthens traditional institutions is likely to help fill the power vacuum that enabled extremists to prosper in the first place.

Given the lack of a viable peace process and the low probability that any peacekeeping force will be able to quell the insurgents, the Bush administration's repeated calls for the UN to authorize the formation and deployment of its own peacekeeping mission were unwise.<sup>38</sup> The Obama administration has made a similar error in throwing its support behind the AU peacekeepers and Ahmed's national security forces. The security situation is dire, but these military band-aids will not remedy it. If Washington wants to make a real difference in Somalia, it should help Somalis devise a comprehensive strategy for transforming the way in which the country is governed, a strategy that restructures the state so as to capitalize on the capacities of indigenous institutions. External military assistance will be necessary to help autonomous regional governments guard their territories and prevent the infiltration of extremists, but if the outside force was composed of troops from non-African Muslim states (such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Pakistan) instead of AU peacekeepers, it might enjoy greater local support and attract fewer accusations of "infidel" interference in Somali affairs. Better policing of Somalia's shorelines and borders would gradually curtail the threat from pirates and terrorists, until enough of the country was converted to stable administration to quash these menaces from the inside.

Other Muslim countries could also help. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has significant influence over extremists in the Somali Islamist movement, both because its Wahhabi version of Islam is currently fashionable among these radicals and because it has probably been a source of at least some of their funding. Riyadh could also provide much of the financing for the whole plan, having reportedly promised to set aside \$1 billion for reconstruction in Somalia.<sup>39</sup>

Washington should complement these actions by openly supporting the independence of Somaliland and by encouraging major African states such as South Africa to take the lead in recognizing it. African states are understandably reluctant to endorse secession, but Somaliland surely qualifies as a *sui generis* case, given not only its proven ability to govern itself but also its precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history as a separately administered region. At the same time, Washington could nudge Ethiopia and Eritrea to settle their long-running border dispute once and for all, thereby helping to stabilize the whole region and reducing the incentives for Asmara to conduct a proxy war against Addis Ababa in Somalia.

Of course, none of this would be easy. The violence and chaos that plague the country would take time to dissipate. Local groups would not trust the new approach

**Somalia calls out for a new approach to state-building that attempts to build from the bottom up.**

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at first, especially given the history of past interventions. And regional governments would require time to make the substantial progress toward stability that would encourage other areas to follow suit. But the biggest challenge to implementing a new paradigm of governance may lie not within Somalia itself, but within an international community that has repeatedly showed an inability to adapt its ineffective approach to fragile states.

### **Lessons beyond Somalia**

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Although Somalia is the most striking example of the failure of imported top-down state models to take root in postcolonial environments, it is certainly not the only one. Many countries, especially in Africa and the Middle East, have struggled because their formal governments, in which the international community has invested enormous amounts of money and advice, are structured in ways inappropriate to their surrounding societies. States cannot acquire the legitimacy, nor can they leverage the indigenous capacities and social ties necessary to govern, if their formal governing structures and systems clash with the informal institutions, values, and identities of the populations they are meant to serve.

Unitary bodies are especially unsuitable in countries divided geographically into numerous ethnic, religious, or tribal groups that have little allegiance to one another, as well as little experience working together toward a common goal. Without a minimum degree of social cohesion, states are unlikely to construct robust governments—no matter how much outside help they receive—nor foster the conditions necessary for stability, growth, and development. Especially when geography separates a state's component groups by vast distances—as in some of Africa's biggest states like Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan—the combination of a weak government and a deeply divided population sets the stage for violent conflict. This formula becomes yet more explosive when the riches from abundant natural resources are available to whoever controls the formal state apparatus.

Increasingly, experts working to build states in fractured societies have discovered the importance of working with indigenous institutions—and the shortcomings of using imported governance systems that have little relevance for local conditions. The U.S. military has increasingly emphasized understanding and working with local institutions and local social structures in trying to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan. The significant reduction in violence in Iraq after

the middle of 2007 was based largely on years of hard-won knowledge of Iraq's complex tribal and sectarian politics.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) has embraced a "drivers of change" analysis, whereby it increasingly seeks to understand countries through nontraditional lenses such as history, culture, power dynamics, political landscape, incentives analysis, and institutional analysis.<sup>41</sup>

The international community needs to look beyond the one-size-fits-all state-building formula if it hopes to fix fragile states. Somalis and others have suffered enough. It is time for a strategy that better fits these countries' social fabric.

## Notes

1. Jeffrey Gettleman, "Anarchy-Cursed Nation Looks to Bottom-Up Rule," *New York Times*, August 18, 2008, p. A6, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/18/world/africa/18somalia.html>.
2. Ibid.
3. Spencer S. Hsu, "Concern Grows Over Recruitment of Somali Americans by Islamists," *Washington Post*, October 4, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/03/AR2009100302901.html>.
4. See Eben Kaplan, "Somalia's Terrorist Infestation," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounders, Web site, June 6, 2006, [www.cfr.org/publication/10781/somalias\\_terrorist\\_infestation.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/10781/somalias_terrorist_infestation.html).
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34. Menkhaus, *Somalia: A Country in Peril, a Policy Nightmare*, p. 9.
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36. Also see Bruton, "Self-Induced Stalemate in Somalia."
37. The term "minority" here is used in its numerical sense: to denote members of clans or subclans that are a distinct minority in a particular district (possibly because they migrated there). The same people would not be considered a minority if they were in the area where their own lineage dominates. The term has a different meaning within Somalia itself, where it mainly refers to people coming from non-Somali backgrounds.
38. See International Crisis Group (ICG), "Somalia: To Move Beyond the Failed State," *Africa Report*, no. 147 (Nairobi and Brussels: ICG, December 23, 2008), pp. i–ii, [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/\(httpDocuments\)/9D9CC1B4208EDEB3C125752800483A04/\\$file/Somalia-To+move+beyond+the+failed+State.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/(httpDocuments)/9D9CC1B4208EDEB3C125752800483A04/$file/Somalia-To+move+beyond+the+failed+State.pdf).
39. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
40. See David Rohde, "Army Enlists Anthropology in War Zones," *New York Times*, October 5, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/05/world/asia/05afghan.html>; Greg Jaffe, "Midlevel Officers Show Enterprise in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2007, p. A1; John A. McCary, "The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): 43–59, [http://www.twq.com/09winter/docs/09jan\\_McCary.pdf](http://www.twq.com/09winter/docs/09jan_McCary.pdf).
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