

The on-going conflict in Somalia: A short report

Written by Joseph Morbi

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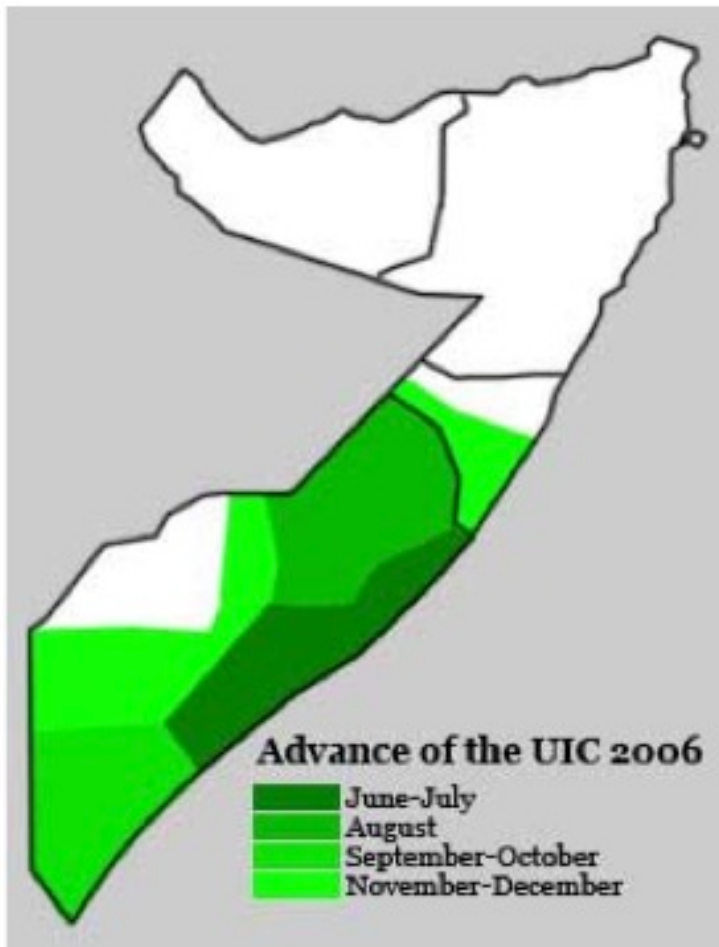
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The Somali Civil War has been a major conflict in Africa since the outbreak of hostilities in 1991 with the ousting of Siad Barre by the United Somali Congress, which itself was the culmination of revolutionary movements which became more prevalent after Barre was injured in a car crash in 1986, threatening the country's stability.[1] Despite the overthrow of the repressive regime, the clans involved were unable to agree on a suitable replacement for Barre and, as a result of clan rivalry, the country descended into a civil war that has now gripped the country for 20 years.[2] The conflict has caused widespread displacement of civilians, with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimating that "1.5 million Somalis are displaced within the country [and]...More than 650,000 are living as refugees in neighbouring countries." [3] This can lead to serious consequences for the countries that the refugees migrate to, an example of this being the rise of Somali gangs in the United Kingdom. The cost of the civil war on the civilian population is enormous and the Genocide Intervention Network has marked Somalia as an Area of Concern, noting that "the scale of harm...is at a level with similar conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan." [4] This report will outline the history of the civil war in Somalia and international attempts to bring peace to the region before looking at the current situation and the international implications of the conflict.

The current Somali Civil War is a by-product of the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991. Opposing rebel forces ousted Barre from power but then turned on each other and 'factional fighting' ensued with various factions vying for control of certain regions. The two largest factions were the Somali National Movement who controlled the north of Somalia, and the United Somali Congress who claimed most of the south, including the capital Mogadishu.[5] The resulting conflict to try and gain control of the country resulted in the displacement, killing and starvation of thousands of civilians, and the onset of a humanitarian crisis prompted international intervention during the 1990s. These included UNOSOM I (United Nations Operations in Somalia) in April 1992, the US-led UNITAF (Unified Task Force) from December 1992 until May 1993, and UNOSOM II which took over from UNITAF from May 1993 until March 1995.[6] UNOSOM I failed in its main task of providing effective security for aid workers and was subsequently replaced by UNITAF, which had far larger humanitarian success, but did not create an effective functioning government or local security force and the rapid withdrawal of US troops led to Mohamed Farrah Aidid ordering the murder of 24 Pakistani soldiers on 5th June 1993, barely a month after UNITAF had made the transition to the UN-led UNOSOM II.[7] UNOSOM II was designed to build on the humanitarian successes of UNITAF whilst also re-establishing "regional institutions and civil administration in the entire country".[8] It failed because the mission changed "from feeding to fighting", particularly after 5th June 1993, the focus becoming more on arresting Mohamed Farrah Aidid and fighting the warring factions, objectives which it ultimately failed to achieve.[9] International involvement in the 1990s was largely ineffective and the country remains to this day without a strong central government. However, the clan-warfare phase of the conflict is no longer running, at least not in the same form as in the 1990s, transitioning instead to a more religious conflict.

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Since 2006 with the rise (and fall) of the Islamic Courts Union the civil war in Somalia has taken a much larger religious dimension. Since the fall of Siad Barre in 1991 the law had largely been maintained by Islamic courts, who had instituted 'Sharia' law and in 2000, 11 of the clans who held these courts agreed to consolidate their power by forming the Islamic Courts Union.[10] The Islamic Courts Union in 2006 began offensive operations in an attempt to create a unified Islamic state. Their main opponent was the Transitional Federal Government, which since 2004 has been the internationally recognised government of Somalia and is the fourteenth attempt to form a stable, functioning government since the fall of Siad Barre in 1991.[11] The Islamic Courts Union quickly took a large area of land (see map) including the capital Mogadishu, although much of this land would be regained through the efforts of forces loyal to the Transitional Federal Government and the Ethiopian military by the end of the year.[12]

The current phase of the civil war has taken the form of an Islamic insurgency with groups such as *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen*, more commonly known as al-Shabaab, fighting to overthrow the Transitional Federal Government, and by late 2008 had retaken much of southern Somalia.[13] These forces have grown stronger particularly since the withdrawal of Ethiopian forces in January 2009 and publicly declared their allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2010.[14] This had already been claimed by individual leaders of the group since 2007, prompting the United States to designate al-Shabaab as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organisation' in February 2008.[15] This current stage of the civil war has widespread international implications with fears of Somali terrorists leaving the country to target both Western and African Union states. One such example was the fear of several Somalis with terrorist links attempting to gain illegal entry into the United States after being mistakenly released from custody in Mexico in 2010.[16] As another example there is also evidence to suggest that extremists have returned to Britain after attending 'terror training camps' in the Somalia.[17] Another issue that has arisen from the displacement and forced migration of Somalis is the rise of Somali gangs, particularly in the United Kingdom, as "inter-communal differences" cause rifts between the groups.[18]

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The Civil War in Somalia has now gripped the country for 20 years, and has now become seemingly a training ground for Islamic terrorists in Africa and as a consequence could become the main focus for the War on Terror in Africa.[19] However the addition of former more moderate Islamic Courts Union members into the Transitional Federal Government, the current president being Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, the former leader of the Islamic Courts Union, could help alleviate some of the religious issues and marginalise groups such as al-Shabaab in the future.[20] The displacement of civilians during the war has the capacity to cause major implications in various countries as refugees struggle to integrate themselves with new communities after their experiences, which can eventually cause increased radicalisation if not addressed effectively and may provide a recruiting ground for terrorist groups. What happens in the near future remains to be seen.

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