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Somalia: Security, AMISOM, Governance, Al-Shabaab and the Future

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DAVID H. SHINN, SEP 26 2012

After years of political stagnation and little meaningful change in the security situation, Somalia has finally reached a point where its new government has the possibility of breaking out of an era of torpor and putting itself on track to achieve widespread national support. The challenges remain immense but improvements in the security situation, a weakening of al-Shabaab, and a relatively fresh slate of political leaders open the door for positive change. This progress will come to an abrupt end, however, if the new leaders fail to crack down hard on the culture of corruption that has permeated the Somali political system. It is also important for the international community to give the Somalis more leeway to determine their future while responding favorably to legitimate requests from the Somali government and reputable civil society organizations.

I have followed, albeit not constantly, developments in Somalia since writing my master's thesis in 1963 on the Pan-Somali movement. The early 1960's were a period of stirring optimism for the development of "pastoral democracy" in Somalia. Within a decade, the optimism began to wane and the trend has been generally downward ever since. Several well-intentioned but false starts involving both the Somali and international communities since 1991 have resulted in big disappointments. Somalia has reached another important decision point. For the first time in many years I am optimistic that it can reverse the downward slide of failed government and restore confidence among the Somali people.

Improve Security

Until there are significant improvements in the security situation, it is almost impossible for any government, even a talented one that eschews corruption, to govern the country and gain the respect of its people. The history of past security mistakes is legion. They include Cold War military collaboration that contributed to regional conflict, the dictatorial approach of Siad Barre and his efforts to subjugate Somaliland, warlord fiefdoms based on clan support, a well-intentioned but mismanaged international intervention in the early and mid-1990s, more warlord politics followed by the rise of the Islamic Courts militia and intervention in Somalia by Ethiopian forces that contributed significantly to the rise of al-Shabaab.

This negative security situation has prevailed for well over two decades and continues to the present day, but with major change in the air. The often-maligned African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) began operations in Mogadishu in 2007 as a lightly regarded force. Ugandan troops have done the heavy lifting for AMISOM aided subsequently by forces from Burundi and then a small unit from Djibouti. By early 2009, following the departure of Ethiopian troops from Mogadishu, AMISOM was the only force left in support of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG). It struggled initially but eventually took control of all of Mogadishu and even extended its authority outside the capital. In August 2012, AMISOM and TFG forces recaptured Merca, southern Somalia's third largest port located about 45 miles south of Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab had controlled Merca since November 2008.

In the meantime, Kenyan forces crossed into Somalia in October 2011 but initially made little progress in combatting al-Shabaab. Their stated goal was to take the key al-Shabaab-held port city of Kismayu, which accounted for much of al-Shabaab's income. In February 2012, AMISOM designated the Kenyan troops as part of its operation. The

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Kenyans and allied Somali forces eventually took the key town of Afmadow in the lower Juba region and are continuing to move towards Kismayu. They recently captured from al-Shabaab a number of small towns east of Afmadow and at last report were about 25 miles west of Kismayu. The allied Somali Ras Kamboni faction supports this effort and is moving from the south towards Kismayu. Kenyan aircraft are being used effectively against al-Shabaab “technicals” or armed vehicles while Kenyan navy vessels occasionally shell Kismayu.

Somali government, Kenyan forces and the Ras Kamboni faction will almost certainly take Kismayu in the coming weeks. Al-Shabaab will pull back into the open spaces of south-central Somalia but lose an important source of income. The hard part for the Somali government and AMISOM will be to develop Somali administration to control Kismayu that can avoid clan politics and internal squabbling. This will be one of several early tests for the new Somali government. The Kenyan government has made clear that it wants to remove its troops from Somalia as soon as possible.

Since leaving Mogadishu in January 2009, Ethiopian forces have periodically crossed the long Ethiopia-Somalia border into Somalia in support of TFG efforts to counter al-Shabaab forces. Ethiopia stepped up this military effort at the end of 2011 when it helped to take back Beledweyne, which is located close to the Ethiopian border and on a main road leading to Ethiopia. Ethiopian forces later helped secure the important regional center of Baidoa (Baydhabo) and a number of small towns. These gains by TFG and Ethiopian forces have shrunk the territory where al-Shabaab can take refuge. Equally important, it has done so without allowing al-Shabaab to use the Ethiopian presence as a rallying cry to attract recruits. By working closely with Somali forces, staying out of Mogadishu, remaining closer to the Ethiopian border and minimizing contact with the media, Ethiopia has avoided most of the criticism that it experienced during its earlier intervention in Somalia.

Al-Shabaab is on the run, but it is not defeated. Even if it loses Kismayu, it can revert to guerrilla tactics by operating from those parts of rural Somalia that may remain outside government and AMISOM control for many months. Al-Shabaab has already increased its suicide bombings and attempted assassinations. Since the beginning of September, al-Shabaab suicide bombers killed three soldiers in Mogadishu in an attempt to assassinate Somalia's new President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. An al-Shabaab suicide attack killed eighteen Somalis, including three journalists, at a restaurant in Mogadishu. An unknown person gunned down another brave Somali journalist as he left his radio station in the capital. Gunmen linked to al-Shabaab killed Member of Parliament Mustaf Haji Mohamed outside his home in Mogadishu in late September. He was the father-in-law of former President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. While these are acts of a desperate al-Shabaab that will alienate most Somalis, they underscore the security challenges that still face the new Somali government.

Improve Governance

Improved security will serve little purpose unless there is at the same time improved governance. This has to start with new Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and extend throughout the government. It is imperative they put national unity and the provision of services to the Somali people first and lay aside personal power and aggrandizement. Outgoing Prime Minister Abdiweli Mohamed Ali said “Somalia voted for change” and the result heralds a new era for Somali politics. Let's hope that is true. At a minimum, there is every reason to give the fledgling government a chance.

President Mohamud told *Aljazeera* in mid-September that he is open to talks with al-Shabaab, which has already turned down the offer. This is a matter that should be left to the Somalis to resolve. While I doubt that there is any reason to talk with the foreign jihadis who still fill many key al-Shabaab positions, the new Somali government leadership may conclude that there are Somali nationalists at al-Shabaab's leadership level or low level functionaries who are willing to talk. By all accounts, al-Shabaab is becoming increasingly subject to factionalism. This trend will almost certainly continue as it loses ground on the battlefield.

The International Community

While many Somalis go out of their way to blame the international community for the ills that have befallen their

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country and there is some truth to many of these criticisms, most of the fault lies with Somalis themselves. Were it not for AMISOM and even the most recent intervention by Ethiopian forces, al-Shabaab would not be in the weakened position that it now faces. Having said that, the sooner that AMISOM and the Ethiopians can turn over total responsibility for security to the Somali government, the better it will be for everyone in the region.

This is a time when the international community should avoid giving political direction to the Somali government, but remain available to provide training of military and civilian personnel and to finance development projects where it is clear the money is being used wisely and for the intended purpose. This is not the time for the international community to try to control the Somali agenda or impose policies that the Somali government strongly opposes. It is also the time for the Somali government to step forward and do what good governments are expected to do.

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