



# Situation Report

Date issued: 14 December 2009  
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Distribution: General  
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## Changing paradigm in Somalia

The election late in January 2009 of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as President of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) was seen as a major step on the road to achieving peace in Somalia and mending relations between the "old" TFG that had emerged from the reconciliation process organised in Kenya between October 2002 and October 2004 and its Islamic opponents, then represented by the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). Despite the prominent role played by Sheikh Sharif in the ICU leadership, after his election he still had to cope with a significant, albeit divided armed opposition, mostly organised around two groups, Hisbul Islam and Hararak al-Shabaab al-Muja'eddin (Shabaab hereafter).

Although the protracted fighting that broke out on 7 May in Mogadishu came as no surprise to many observers, it represented the first overt signal that the Djibouti reconciliation process started in June 2008 had not been the success most of the international community had anticipated, an expectation based upon assumptions about the popularity of the new President. The following months merely went to show that the approach taken by the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General was too incomplete and, some would add, too one-sided to have been successful.

As in 2006, the international discourse emphasised a number of potential dangers in Somalia's security dynamics but disregarded others, so as to avoid questioning a previous unwillingness to take a more inclusive and incremental approach. This behaviour was not new as far as Somali affairs were concerned but indicated that the international community was continuing to ignore the bigger picture and lessons from other current conflicts. Indeed, those who follow the international debate on Iraq and Afghanistan might well be amazed by the United Nations' and its close allies' proposal of policies for Somalia that had already failed in those two countries: security sector reform and the strengthening of the TFG alone could not provide a solution.

In the current regional and global context blaming Eritrea was easy and not completely unreasonable. However, this did not create many policy options, indeed, further isolating Eritrea might increase the dangers of the situation. There was a significant risk that applying increased pressures and sanctions on Asmara could prove counterproductive. Clearly, also, such a strategy offered few incentives for Eritrea to listen more positively to its critics and for the international community to address the likely motivations for Asmara's attitude. Next year,

The usual suspects

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2010, would be difficult for Sudan and Ethiopia, not least because of their electoral processes, and it would be important to avoid creating opportunities for potential spoilers.

Highlighting the involvement of foreign fighters in Somalia surely underlines the dangers of the current military dynamic, and the reality of their presence is not questioned here. Yet these claims had been made late in 2006 already, and their truth then was less impressive than the noise made about them. After months of fighting, the military impact of foreign fighters seems more debatable, and questions should also be raised whether the majority of these people actually were connected to al-Qaeda in any significant way.

Shabaab embodies all the characteristics of this period. It is described as powerful and ruthless, able to brainwash teenagers and sow fear among the population it rules. If this reflects the whole truth, Shabaab is the only voluntary military organisation in the world able to grow without providing a positive sense of belonging at least to some of its members. Descriptions of the organisation provided by actors on the ground are ambiguous: AMISOM officers foresee splits and clashes of personality, NGOs working in zones Shabaab controls emphasise the different attitudes local commanders have about key social issues and the humanitarian presence. The population in those areas may be coerced, manipulated and voiceless, yet people are not escaping in numbers to places controlled by other factions or by the TFG. At this stage, whatever the reality of this organisation, those who believe in the simplistic version are probably victims of their own propaganda. Because Shabaab might represent a real and present danger, it has to be considered for what it is, not in terms of its caricature.

The security approach structures the international response to the Somali crisis to the extent that there is little perceived need for an analysis of the situation on the ground, of its numerous grey areas and the contradictions habitually indulged in by all Somali actors. In this superficial understanding, Somali politics, once characterised by factionalism, ambitious politico-military entrepreneurs and shifting alliances, has become an arena where good guys endorsed by the international community fight against bad guys supported by Eritrea and al-Qaeda.

There is a need for a general rethinking of these assumptions, for a drastic change in the way key international stakeholders look at Somalia and its neighbours. It is imperative to reconsider the policy choices made under the previous US Administration, which went virtually unchallenged by the United Nations, the African Union and the European Union. These policy choices proved both counterproductive and extremely costly in humanitarian terms for the Somali population.

A number of features that the United Nations and its closest allies (basically the P-3) chose to ignore at the earlier stage of the Djibouti reconciliation process should be considered and given their due importance. This would promote a necessary and pressing debate within the US Administration, oblige the UN to attempt a much deeper understanding of the situation it is dealing with, and bring into prospect an acceptable solution to restore peace in South Central Somalia, instead of continuing with the short term project of the last 18 months, which concentrated on building a loose consensus.

These past mistakes and political choices explain why a number of key misunderstandings prevailed and continue to jeopardise a broader reconciliation. Principal misunderstandings could be listed under three headings: the bipolarity of moderates versus extremists; the TFG as an embodiment of a power sharing agreement; the weaknesses of the current leadership.

After the collapse of the ICU following the Ethiopian intervention, the situation in Somalia stabilised only very briefly. As episodes of fighting broke out recurrently, the armed opposition, or some parts of it, looked for political vehicle. Eventually, the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) was established in Asmara in autumn 2007. This group intended to bring together the former ICU with a more

secularly oriented nationalist tendency and a significant segment of the Somali diaspora. Eritrea was very influential in this process but, as any foreign or regional actor, had at one point to accept that it could not maintain its influence for too long.

Early in 2008, the ARS split in ways the international community never considered very deeply. One faction remained in Asmara and became labelled as “hardline” while the other led by Sheikh Sharif was suddenly labelled as more pragmatic and open-minded. From the very beginning, some in the international community were absolutely convinced that the ARS/Djibouti was moderate, simply because of the personality of its leader and the stances taken by most of his delegation throughout the initial talks. There are good reasons to share this view, especially where the current TFG president is concerned. There is also an incredible degree of naivety involved in broadening a personality trait into an organisational generalisation.

On the one hand, structural factionalism has framed Somali politics for many years; the way the Islamic Courts Union and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia were created and collapsed provide good illustrations of this situation. Personal connections and conflicts, rivalries, bitterness linked to past mistakes (especially in the ICU’s collapse in December 2006) are better explanations than ideological commitment for many cadres of the TFG opposition. Yet the international community merely adopted a simplistic approach, as if the Somali context had no role. The willingness of ARS/Djibouti to talk to the international community under the latter’s conditions became evidence of ideological moderation.

On the other hand, as the meetings called by the mediation took place outside Somalia, there was little inclination to question the depth of a measure of consensus (and the consequences of ARS/Djibouti and TFG’s diasporic orientation). For example, many in the diplomatic community in Nairobi were deeply astonished that key people around the TFG President were both opposed to AMISOM’s stay in Mogadishu and also wanted Shari’a to be fully implemented, a position hardly popular in Western chancelleries. The very ideological heterogeneity of Sheikh Sharif’s faction was not appreciated until it became a “problem”.

With the passage of a number of months, all Somali factions experienced defections among their membership. There is strong evidence that in most cases those failing to lend support to the TFG joined Hizbul-Islam, while those who left this latter organisation joined the former. The story of two French secret service agents also provides circumstantial evidence that the gap between those two groups is not as profound as many in the international community thought or hoped. Many cadres of these two factions actually share the same political history and ideological commitments.

Had the analysis been deeper and political realism greater, the best choice would have been to keep close contact with (at least) the ARS/Asmara and Hizbul Islam, not to label them as war criminals and the like, as the UN SRSG did too often. Contrary to other conflicts (Burundi and Darfur to cite two when the AU has been involved), the UN SRSG behaved as if the mediation effort had been achieved simply through the inclusion of Sheikh Sharif and his associates: rallying other groups was suddenly beyond his mandate.

Shabaab always raises a different set of problems because of its flamboyant statements and its jihadi rhetoric. Yet, without entering into details, Shabaab merges three different tendencies: a section of al-Iti’sam (the more ideologically committed to neo-Salafiyya, compared to the first Islamist armed group, al-Itihaad), an ICU group which wanted to get Islamic Courts militias freed from their clan labels and the “Afghans” (i.e. those who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s). The international discourse today focuses only on this third component, although the other two are well represented among middle-rank cadres and local commanders. Again, an assessment of Shabaab’s rule at the local level raises many questions about the idea of a politically homogenous organisation driven

only by a global jihadist ideology. This does not make them the moderates in the sense Western and UN diplomats dream of; but neither does it make them the die-hard jihadists depicted in foreign media.

The international community made a great deal of maintaining the existence of the TFG after October 2004 despite its internal crises and the personality clashes among its leadership. It therefore wanted the TFG to survive this further crisis and thought the Djibouti process was the right and, indeed, only channel for achieving a power sharing agreement between the “old” TFG set up in October 2004 and the ARS/Djibouti. No cost/benefit assessment was carried out to calculate the probable end result.

First, many Somalis (especially Hawiye) saw the original TFG as a Trojan horse for Ethiopian influence. There is no point here in discussing this view, but its prevalence suggested that the new TFG would have to convince its own population that this perception was wrong or no longer valid. Such political work was not undertaken. Moreover, on a number of occasions, the post-January 2009 TFG appeared to be promoted by those states that had been bombing and shelling Somalia until recently. The conclusions of the donors conference in Brussels, the call for military intervention by neighbouring states (made by the Speaker of Parliament), the supply of weapons and ammunition by the US government, the continued presence of AMISOM as (sole) guarantor of the TFG’s survival, the mandate given to a foreign firm (PriceWaterhouseCoopers) to supervise the allocation of foreign aid to Somalia, and the delimitation of the sea borders, were only a few examples of a very poor management of decisions that shocked Somali public opinion and reinforced the view that the TFG was acting under the tutelage of a group of powerful trustees.

But it is not only a question of bad public diplomacy by reason of ignorance or contempt. As with any power-sharing agreement, the new TFG faced the usual problem of building trust and confidence between old adversaries, a task that was not carried out effectively, to say the least. This became very clear throughout the recent fighting in South Central Somalia. For instance, there was no doubt that many potential supporters of the current TFG were unwilling to fight. Many who are ARS/Djibouti members believed that they should not be fighting alongside people who might still be on the payroll of certain regional or western states. Others believed that they could not fight alongside non-Muslims against Muslims, so nominal was their ownership of the TFG. For its part, the TFG was reluctant to ally with groups that were fighting the same enemies: for instance, the “Sufi” militias of Ahle Sunna wa Jamma were considered in Villa Somalia (the presidential palace) more as a rival than an ally.

By endorsing the TFG, Sheikh Sharif himself became hostage to its dysfunctional setting. Suddenly, he had to endorse a number of rules he had previously publicly argued against: for instance, regardless of the effect upon efficiency, ministerial positions in his cabinet were allocated in accordance with the 4.5 clan formula. He had also to allocate positions, satisfy a large array of people (clan elders, business people, and former officials) at a time when he was supposed to be articulating new proposals for rebuilding the country, and appease the armed opposition. Mediating the division of the spoils of a non-existent state among his would-be supporters became his principal function.

Beyond the security issues, one may also consider other issues concerning the Parliament or the cabinet and express concern about whether institutions dominated to such an extent by diaspora people would eventually be able to work and rule a town or a region, let alone the whole country.

To a great number of analysts including this author, when the Djibouti process started Sheikh Sharif appeared to be a good choice for the tasks of ruling Somalia and reconciling a population with itself. His main duties were to consolidate his grip on the TFG and reduce the real danger represented by the armed opposition.

The ICU had never shown much talent in its dealings with the outside world. Its internal disagreements were too numerous to allow the few people ready to undertake such work to perform it in a consistent manner. After December 2006 Sheikh Sharif became very aware of this shortcoming, yet it is one that still characterises most ministers who had belonged to the ICU.

One consequence of this was that Sheikh Sharif placed too much emphasis on pleasing the international community. He behaved increasingly as a quiet, urban secular Somali politician, playing to the preferences of his UN and Western interlocutors. Yet by doing this he considerably weakened his Islamic credentials and allowed his armed opposition to label his cabinet as stooges controlled by non-Muslims.

Again perceptions played against him. As the departure of the Ethiopian army failed to translate into any improvement in the daily life of the population, he was criticised increasingly for the lack of progress. Over the last months, he often has been described as over-ambitious, a man who sacrificed his friends for the sake of dealing with the West and never really was sincere in the various attempts to reconcile the two ARS wings. Moreover, he is also seen as hostage of his entourage: people (including TFG supporters and even ministers) are outspoken that at any time a cluster of ministers are able to interrupt a meeting with him and/or attend it without any justification. But again, the point is that the TFG no longer seems the channel for reconstruction but for fulfilling the same ambitions as were the institutions used by the previous generation of leaders.


Whatever the reality behind the involvement of PriceWaterhouseCoopers, corruption remains a key issue. Some cabinet members accuse influential ministers, TFG MPs and Somali businessmen of embezzlement and sometimes even of blackmail. This sort of claim is not novel in Somali politics but the donors have tried for too long to divert their gaze while TFG supporters have been asking why one should risk one's life in a fight regarded by others principally as a way to increase their personal wealth.

The eviction of the first TFG President, Abdullahi Yusuf, was resented as a humiliation by many Darod. For the sake of reconciling the new TFG with those and other clans, a reshuffle took place in August 2009. New ministers were appointed and the TFG hopes to regain a degree of support (if not legitimacy) that existed under the "old" TFG; Western diplomats have been insisting on the need to do this.

Expectations from such a move should be modest, however. Clan appeal was a structuring element of the armed groups in the 1990s and, for good or ill, this principle of organisation collapsed in the 2006 Mogadishu war. Clans are now divided to a level that makes it virtually impossible to say whether, roughly speaking, a clan is endorsing this side or that in the current war. Since December 2006, the logic of war has been dictated by new considerations, including ideology (nationalism as well as the various Islamist schools of thought).

Over the last eight years, the international community, whether intentionally or not, has addressed the Somali crisis principally through a counter-terrorist approach. For a number of reasons alluded to in this text, such an attempt to provide a settlement in Somalia has failed dramatically in South Central Somalia, has undermined the few achievements made in terms of governance in Puntland (as piracy proves) and Somaliland (where free and fair elections appear increasingly distant) and, more importantly, has hindered only marginally the development of radical trends that could tomorrow raise security concerns far beyond Somalia's territory.

As in Afghanistan, the international community should acknowledge the failure of its paradigmatic assumptions and open a frank dialogue on whether the continuation of certain policies is merely a signal of the inability to understand political processes inside Somalia. It should also reorganise its approach in the best interests of the Somali people' and the concerns of the regional states.



As in Afghanistan, too, the main external players should acknowledge that there cannot be any military solution, as illustrated by the last three years of inconclusive fighting, and that the current government, so dysfunctional in many respects, merely raises the stakes and emphasises the urgency of a policy review rather than offering any realistic prospect of an incremental solution.

As in Afghanistan, it is in the best interests of the international community to acknowledge that engaging the insurgents, though an uneasy decision, would be the less likely to lead to failure, would open up the political arena and break the deadlock preventing genuine negotiations between the TFG and its armed opponents. Peace is about stopping war between enemies. To a large extent, the Djibouti process failed because doors were not kept open by those leading the mediation. This was very unfortunate in that, though it may have provided short term benefits, it hampered more lasting internal reconciliation. Because of this failure and others, mediation scenarios should include not only winning over segments of the armed opposition but also a reconciliation conference in which all sectors of the Somali society would participate.

The African Union has become a key element in the implementation of the current policy in Somalia and, despite the reluctance of certain member states and the refusal by the United Nations to allow a political office in Somalia, should be at the forefront of this policy review. Because of its dedication and its role on the ground, the AU it should see that only a broader agenda dealing politically (and not militarily) with the regional components of the conflict, the multi-faceted armed opposition and the intricacies of Somali factionalism, offers a reasonable chance of success.

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