



SOMALIA

Quick Facts

Population: 11,031,386

Area: 637,657 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Somali 85%, Bantu and other non-Somali 15% (including 30,000 Arabs)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$6.522 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated May 2018)

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. State Department's 2016 on global terrorism trends notes that, despite suffering a series of setbacks in the first half of 2015, al-Shabaab has proven resilient and "adopted increasingly aggressive tactics" aimed at both delegitimizing the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and weakening the resolve of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) via an increase in attacks on AMISOM military bases in Southern Somalia, as well as attacks in neighboring AMISOM troop-contributing countries.¹ Nevertheless, the group has had to grapple with the death of several key leadership figures as a result of U.S. aerial strikes, the loss of strongholds in parts of south-central Somalia, and, in the view of U.S. authorities, increasing factionalism and defections "as the appeal of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) created divisions within al-Shabaab's core leadership."² ISIL itself, which retains a small foothold in Somalia, has sought to increase its presence in sub-Saharan countries such as Somalia after significant defeats in the Middle East and North Africa. Other Islamist groups, such as Hizbul Islam and the Ras Kamboni Brigades, also pose, albeit significantly lesser, threats. One reason for these groups' resilience is the weakness of Somalia's internationally-recognized FGS, whose authority is not widely accepted by Somalis. Hampering the U.S. response to this threat is not only the absence of a capable partner government in the Somali capital of Mogadishu but also Washington's failure to creatively engage effective Somali authorities, including those in the unrecognized Republic of Somaliland.³

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islamists active in Somalia fall roughly into one of seven principal groups:

Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen ("Movement of Warrior Youth," al-Shabaab)

Known colloquially as al-Shabaab, this movement arose out of the militant wing of the Islamic Courts Union. Following the defeat of the latter by the Ethiopian intervention in early 2007, al-Shabaab broke with other Islamists who regrouped under the sponsorship of Eritrea to form the Alliance for the Liberation of Somalia (ARS) to oppose the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) then installed in Mogadishu.

Founded in large part due to the efforts of Aden Hashi Ayro, a militant who had trained with al-Qaeda

in Afghanistan prior to September 11, 2001, al-Shabaab's schism with other Islamists reflects Ayro's adherence to a more radical jihadist ideology that does not countenance cooperation with the non-Muslim Eritrean regime, even against a common enemy. Although divided into several factions even before Ayro was killed by a U.S. aerial strike in May 2008, al-Shabaab was an effective fighting force overall. The senior leadership of al-Shabaab has included veteran jihadists with experience on battlefields abroad, including in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kashmir.⁴ It managed to seize control of large sections of southern and central Somalia, including parts of Mogadishu, where it has installed a strict Islamist regime that, to the horror of many Somalis, has carried out a number of harsh punishments—among them the stoning of a 13-year-old rape victim for the crime of “adultery” in 2008.⁵

Over time, al-Shabaab's leadership split into two principal currents. The first, hard-line faction, consisting primarily of foreign or foreign-funded jihadists, follows a transnational jihadist agenda, evidenced by the attack on Kenya's Westgate Shopping Mall in 2013 and the subsequent April 2015 attack on Garissa University in Garissa, Kenya—incidents which collectively left over 200 people dead and scores injured. Ahmed Abdi Godane, also known as Mukhtar Abu Zubair, initially spearheaded this faction and proclaimed the group's formal allegiance to al-Qaeda and to Osama bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in February 2012.

The other faction, made up of clan-based militia leaders with a more “nationalist” agenda, emphasized expelling foreign forces from Somalia and focusing on local control. At the very end of 2011, the latter group declared its intention to rename itself the “Islamic Emirate of Somalia” and rejected al-Qaeda's branding and objectives, instead focusing primarily on Somalia's domestic challenges.⁶

The internal divisions within al-Shabaab helped facilitate its loss of control over Somalia. Since Kenyan and Ethiopian troops joined African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Transitional Federal Government forces to expel Al-Shabaab from major cities beginning in late 2011, the group has surrendered its strongholds in numerous regional capitals. Defections of al-Shabaab soldiers have increased substantially. In December 2012, Godane admitted to having experienced major defeats, but pledged to continue a guerrilla war against Somali and AMISOM forces.⁷

In 2013, Godane moved against the nationalist faction of the organization, killing or forcing into hiding most of its senior leadership.⁸ While Godane himself was killed by a U.S. aerial strike in September 2014, al-Shabaab continues to adhere to transnational jihadism. Under the leadership of Godane's successor, Ahmed Omar, al-Shabaab continues to focus less on holding control of territory and more on launching successful attacks both within Somalia and in neighbouring countries. These attacks include overrunning Ugandan and Kenyan-run AMISOM bases in the southern Somali towns of Janale and El Adde, attacks on hotels and FGS figures in Mogadishu, and attacks on soft targets in neighboring AMISOM troop-contributing countries, including Kenya and Djibouti.

The rise and fall of the Islamic State in the Middle East has created another challenge to the organizational unity of al-Shabaab. Several factions of the group in Puntland and Southern Somalia have pledged alliance to the Islamic State, a move that sparked a crackdown on defectors in late 2015 by al-Shabaab's senior central leadership.⁹ Nevertheless, the Islamic State's media offices continue to encourage al-Shabaab-affiliated fighters in Somalia and members of the Somali diaspora abroad to support the group, and rumors continue to swirl of ongoing clashes between factions loyal to the Islamic State and those loyal to al-Qaeda.¹⁰ After the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2017 and the collapse of its Libyan affiliate in 2016, the group has sought to expand into sub-Saharan Africa, redirecting the flow of arms and fighters to the Sahel, Maghreb, and Horn of Africa. As ISIL seeks to regroup and rebuild its networks in Somalia, the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) has received enhanced authorities to counter the group.¹¹ On November 3, 2017, AFRICOM conducted its first airstrikes against the Islamic State in Somalia, underscoring the potent threat this group now poses to the country.¹²

Hizbul Islam (“Islamic Party”)

Led by Hassan Dahir ‘Aweys, previously the military commander of Somali Muslim Brotherhood offshoot al-Itihaad al-Islamiyya (AIAI, the “Islamic Union”) and subsequently the chairman of the shura of the Islamic Courts Union, Hizbul Islam is the product of a merger of several groups. Its primary difference with al-Shabaab is that Hizbul Islam does not place as much emphasis on global jihadist objectives; rather, its two principal demands are the implementation of a strict version of sharia as the law in Somalia, and withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country. Unlike the multi-clan contingency of al-Shabaab, Hizbul Islam draws its membership and support primarily from ‘Aweys’ Habar Gedir sub-clan.¹³ By and large, Hizbul Islam has cooperated with al-Shabaab, although the two groups have come into occasional conflict over the division of spoils. Hizbul Islam lost control of the strategic town of Beledweyne to al-Shabaab in June 2010, retaining only some territory in the southern and central Somali regions of Bay and Lower Shabelle. Subsequently, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the two groups cooperated on a joint offensive against TFG and AMISOM forces in Mogadishu. Reports of a merger between the two groups emerged at the end of 2010,¹⁴ but in September 2012 a spokesperson from Hizbul Islam announced its split with Al-Shabaab, citing ideological differences and al-Shabaab’s weakened position in the region.¹⁵ Hizbul Islam’s stance with respect to the Somali government is unclear, as is the current state of the group. While ‘Aweys is reported to have declared war against the regime after Sheikh Hassan Mohamud was elected president in September 2012,¹⁶ the group’s spokesman, Mohamed Moalim, was also quoted welcoming the new president and parliament as a “positive development.”¹⁷ In fact, ‘Aweys came to Mogadishu in June 2013 for talks with government officials but was arrested and reportedly roughed up.¹⁸ Since then, with ‘Aweys in custody, very little has been heard from his followers.

Mu’askar Ras Kamboni (“Ras Kamboni Brigades”)

Founded by Hassan Abdullah Hersi (“al-Turki”), a former military commander for the Islamic Courts, the Ras Kamboni Brigades is based in Middle and Lower Jubba Valley, where it gained control of several strategically located towns which control access to the Kenyan border, including Jilib Afmadoow, and Dhoobley. The group was aligned with Hizbul Islam until late 2009, when al-Shabaab took control of the port of Kismayo. A faction of Ras Kamboni, led by al-Turki, announced in early 2010 that it was joining forces with al-Shabaab and proclaimed its adhesion to “the international jihad of al-Qaeda.”¹⁹

The rest of the Ras Kamboni Brigades follows Sheikh Ahmed Mohamed Islam, a.k.a. Sheikh Ahmed Madobe, who served as the former governor of Kismayo from 2006 until the fall of the Islamic Courts Union.²⁰ Rumored to have strong relations with the Kenyan government, the Madobe-led Ras Kamboni group played a key role in helping the AMISOM, Kenyan, and Somali government forces push al-Shabaab out of the town of Kismayo in October 2012, although some Mogadishu-based Somali government officials denied having cooperated with the “competing militants.”²¹ In 2013, while continuing to lead the Ras Kamboni Brigades against Al-Shabaab forces in the region, Madobe was elected president of the newly established autonomous region of Jubaland.²²

A spokesperson of the Somali government forces in Juba reported that the group subsequently allied with Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) to fight for control the port city,²³ leading to clashes with government troops in February 2013.²⁴ However, in August 2013, Madobe signed an Ethiopian-brokered “national reconciliation agreement” with the FGS that allowed him to remain in control of Kismayo at the head of an “interim administration” that would preside over the police forces in Jubaland, while military forces were gradually integrated into the national army.²⁵

Ahlu-Sunna wal-Jama’a (roughly, “[Followers of] the Traditions and Consensus [of the Prophet Muhammad]”)

The original Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama’a was an umbrella group of traditional Somali Muslims organized

by General Muhammad Farah ‘Aideed as a counterweight to his Wahhabi-inspired opponents in AIAI.²⁶ In mid-2009, the excesses of al-Shabaab led to a revival of the movement to oppose the ideology which Shabaab and other Islamist insurgents have appropriated from some of their foreign sponsors. Loosely organized into armed militias on a clan basis and with roots in the Sufi brotherhoods, Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama’a fighters in 2010 managed in a number of places to stop what had seemed to be the relentless surge of al-Shabaab forces. Trained and assisted by the defense forces of neighboring Ethiopia, which have allowed some of the movement’s units the use of its territory, Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama’a emerged as a force in southern and central Somalia. However, the group’s opposition to al-Shabaab should not be confused with support of the TFG. In fact, the group’s formal alliance with the TFG in 2010, brought about under tremendous pressure from regional and international actors, has largely fallen apart. In any event, while Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama’a has neither the international links nor the global strategic vision of al-Shabaab, it has an Islamist agenda of its own—for example, the group has conducted operations against those who it felt were not properly observing the fast of Ramadan—that may set it at odds with the more secular elements of Somali society.²⁷

The group took control of several towns and villages in Galgadud and Hiran.²⁸ After assisting the Somali government fight al-Shabaab for two years, in December 2012, Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama’a troops were officially integrated into Somali government forces.²⁹ In February 2013, the chairman of the executive committee of Ahlu Sunna wal Jama’a, Sheikh Mohamed Yusuf Hefow, passed away in a hospital in Mogadishu.³⁰ Since then, relations between the militia and the FGS have frayed over issues of power in Galgadud, occasioning sporadic clashes between Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama’a loyalists and Somali national government forces, notably a February 2015 clash in Guricel that left nine dead.³¹

Al-Islah al-Islamiyya (“Islamic Movement”)

In 2004, the U.S. Department of State described al-Islah as an “organized Islamic group whose goal is the establishment of an Islamic state,” but termed it “a generally nonviolent movement that operates primarily in Mogadishu.”³² Largely displaced during the period when the Islamic Courts Union was ascendant, al-Islah underwent something of a revival in Mogadishu with the return of Sharif Ahmed to the head of the TFG in 2009. Its chief role was the administration of schools in the capital which were supported by the group’s foreign benefactors. It is not surprising, given how spectacularly state institutions have collapsed in Somalia, that “this naturally promoted fundamentalist trends (such as al-Islah) in local Islam, which had previously been largely Sufi in character, and these were encouraged by financial support from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern centers.”³³ Hassan Sheikh Mohamed, who was elected head of the Somali government in September 2012, has links with al-Islah.³⁴

Al-Qaeda

While its earlier foray into Somalia did not prove particularly successful, al-Qaeda remains interested in Somalia both as a theater of operations and as a jumping-off point for terrorist activities in the nearby Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere in Africa.³⁵ An audio statement released by Osama bin Laden in 2009 in praise of the Islamist insurgency in Somalia and calling upon Muslims to support it underscored this reality.³⁶ More recently, Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden’s successor, endorsed Ahmed Omer, Godane’s successor and the current leader of al-Shabaab.³⁷ Even analysts who previously discounted al-Qaeda’s involvement in Somalia now acknowledge that, since at least early 2008, al-Qaeda advisors have played a critical role in al-Shabaab operations,³⁸ a fact highlighted by the September 2009 strike inside Somalia by U.S. Special Operations Forces which killed Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, a Kenyan national wanted in connection with the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya. At the time of his death, Nabhan was running terrorist training camps and bringing in foreign trainers and fighters to support al-Shabaab, presumably at the behest of al-Qaeda. In February 2012, the leadership

of al-Shabaab formally pledged its allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.³⁹ Since then, the al-Shabaab continues to receive support from al-Qaeda and carry out attacks in its name, including the 2013 assault on Kenya's Westgate Mall and a 2017 truck bombing in Mogadishu that killed over 500 Somalis.

The Islamic State (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Daesh)

Although its success to date has been limited, the Islamic State has sought to re-establish itself in Somalia following major defeats in the Levant and Libya in 2017 and 2016, respectively, focusing its efforts on coopting al-Shabaab forces demoralized by their battlefield losses in recent years. In March 2016, the Islamic State claimed its first attack in Somalia, the bombing of an African Union vehicle in Mogadishu, and subsequently released a video showing what it claimed was its first Somali training camp. The group has reportedly attracted several hundred al-Shabaab defectors, as well as a number of prominent imams, especially in the northeastern part of Somalia.⁴⁰ In October 2016, a group led by Abdulqadir Mumin—a commander who broke away from al-Shabaab to declare allegiance to ISIL in 2015—captured and briefly held the port town of Qandala in northern Somalia, a major propaganda victory for the group.⁴¹ The expanding threat of ISIL's presence in the country was underscored by US airstrikes that targeted the group in Somalia for the first time in November 2017.

ISLAM AND SOCIETY

Traditionally, the Somali subscribe to Sunni Islam and follow the Shāfi'ī school (madhab) of jurisprudence, which, although conservative, is open to a variety of liberal views regarding practice.⁴² Up until the time of Somalia's independence in 1960, there were different movements within the Sunni Islam in Somalia. The most dominant were the Sufi brotherhoods (sing., tarīqa, pl. turuq), especially that of the Qadiriyya order (although the Ahmadiyya order, introduced into Somali lands in the 19th century, was also influential).⁴³ While traditional Islamic schools and scholars (ulamā) played a role as focal points for rudimentary political opposition to colonial rule in Italian Somalia, historically their role in the politics of the Somali clan structure was neither institutionalized nor particularly prominent. In part this is because sharia historically was not especially entrenched in Somalia: being largely pastoralists, the Somali relied more on customary law (xeer) than on religious prescriptions.⁴⁴ Hence, Somali Islamism is largely a post-colonial movement which became active in the late 1980s and which was strengthened by the collapse of the state in 1991 and the ensuing civil war, international intervention, external meddling, and efforts by Somalis themselves at political reconstruction. Absent this chain of events, it is doubtful that militant Islamism would be much more than a marginal force in Somali politics.

Although its adherents often appeal to the early 20th century anti-colonial fight of the “Mad Mullah” Sayyid Muhammad ‘Abdille Hassan,⁴⁵ Somali Islamism is, at its origins, an import dating back at most to the 1950s. The 1953 establishment in Mogadishu of an Institute of Islamic Studies run by Egyptian scholars from Cairo's al-Azhar University introduced both Arabic language curriculum and contact with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimoon). As is well-known, unlike the Sufis who emphasize socialization, moral education, and spiritual preparation, the Muslim Brothers stress organization, activism, and the socio-political dimension of change directed toward the creation of a modern Islamic state. After Somalia's independence in 1960, Egyptians opened secondary schools in many of the country's towns. In the 1960s and 1970s, Saudi religious and educational institutions—especially the Islamic University of Medina, the Umm al-Qura University in Mecca, and the Imam Muhammad bin Saud Islamic University in Riyadh—joined al-Azhar in offering scholarships to the graduates of these institutions. This development has parallels with the entrenchment of radical Islam in nearby Sudan via the establishment of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, the precursor to the currently-ruling National Congress Party (formerly the National Islamic Front).

By the 1970s, the nascent Somali Muslim Brotherhood was so visible that the dictatorial regime of

Siyad Barre took measures to suppress it, driving its adherents underground. The Somali Muslim Brothers eventually coalesced into two groups: al-Islah al-Islamiyya (“Islamic Movement”) founded in Saudi Arabia in 1978, and al-Itihaad al-Islamiyya (AIAI, the “Islamic Union”), established in the early 1980s. The memberships of the two and their leadership network overlapped considerably. The differences between them were, at least initially, largely a function of the circumstances of their clandestine origins. Both sought the creation of an expansive “Islamic Republic of Greater Somalia” and eventually a political union embracing all Muslims in the Horn of Africa.⁴⁶

The collapse in January 1991 of the Siyad Barre regime led to internecine warfare that laid waste to Somalia. AIAI was forced to withdraw after heavy fighting. This withdrawal, which coincided with the fall of the Derg in neighboring Ethiopia, allowed Somali Islamists to regroup in the Somali region of Ethiopia where there were also large numbers of refugees from Somalia proper. AIAI tried to seize control of strategic assets like seaports and crossroads. Although it temporarily held the northern port of Bosaso and the eastern ports of Marka and Kismayo, the only area where it exercised long-term control was the economically vital intersection of Luuq, in southern Somalia, near the Ethiopian border, where it imposed harsh sharia-based rule from 1991 until 1996. From its base in Luuq, the Islamists of AIAI encouraged subversive activities among ethnic Somalis of Ethiopia and carried out a series of terrorist attacks. The exasperated Ethiopian regime finally intervened in Somalia in August 1996, wiping out AIAI bases in Luuq and Buulo Haawa and killing hundreds of Somali extremists, as well as scores of non-Somalis who had flocked to the Horn of Africa under the banner of jihad. From this period emerged the cooperation between Somali Islamists and Ethiopian groups like the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), which continue to struggle against the newly established government of Ethiopia.

From its inception, the AIAI rejected the non-confessional nature of the Somali state and sought to establish an Islamic regime in the country based on a strict Wahhabi interpretation of the Muslim faith. When, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Siyad Barre dictatorship, it found the direct road to power blocked by Muhammad Farah ‘Aideed, it adopted a subtler approach based on the establishment of economic and other social programs, together with Islamic courts.⁴⁷

Some Somalis have come to see Islam as an alternative to both the traditional clan-based identities and the emergent criminal syndicates led by so-called “warlords.” The increased influence of religion has been largely a phenomenon of small towns and urban centers, although increased adherence to its normative precepts is a wider phenomenon. Islamic religious leaders have helped organize security and other services and businessmen in particular were supportive of the establishment of sharia-based courts throughout the south, which were a precursor of the Islamic Courts Union established in Mogadishu in June 2006. The Islamists attempted to fill certain voids left by state collapse and otherwise unattended to by emergent forces like the warlords. In doing so, they also made a bid to supplant clan and other identities, offering a pan-Islamist identity in lieu of other allegiances.⁴⁸

Given their previous experiences with Somali Islamism, especially in its AIAI incarnation, it was not surprising that, after many of the same extremists emerged in positions of authority in the Islamic Courts Union, the Ethiopians would intervene as they did in 2006 to support Somalia’s internationally-recognized but weak “Transitional Federal Government” (TFG), the fourteenth such attempt at a secular national government since 1991.⁴⁹ Unfortunately, while the intervention ended the rule of the Islamic Courts Union, it also provoked an insurgency spearheaded by the even more radical Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (“Movement of Warrior Youth,” al-Shabaab), a group subsequently designated a “specially designated global terrorist” by the U.S. Department of State in 2008⁵⁰ and a “listed terrorist organization” by the Australian government the following year.⁵¹ Even after Ethiopian troops withdrew in early 2009, the Shabaab-led insurgency against the TFG has continued, drawing the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) deployed to protect the transitional regime deeper into the conflict and causing them to suffer increasing casualties with terrorist attacks like the suicide bombing of September 17, 2009, which killed

seventeen peacekeepers and wounded more than forty others,⁵² and that of December 3, 2009, which killed three TFG ministers as well as sixteen other people attending a graduation ceremony within the small enclave of Mogadishu thought to still be controlled by the beleaguered regime.⁵³

With the end of the TFG's mandate in August 2012, the Somali Federal Government was formed—depending on how one counts them, the new entity is either the fifteenth or the sixteenth interim regime since the collapse of the Siad Barre dictatorship in 1991. Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, an educator and civil society activist with ties to al-Islah as well as the earlier Union of Islamist Courts, was selected to head the new government, which was formally recognized by the United States in January 2013, the first Somali regime to be accorded that status in more than two decades. While the Federal Government of Somalia, with the help of AMISOM, has managed to roll back al-Shabaab territorial control in southern Somalia, the group continues to regularly strike SFG-affiliated targets in the capital city of Mogadishu, including an attack on the Nasa Hablod hotel in June 2016, which killed a serving government minister, among other victims.

After numerous delays due to security concerns, Somalia elected Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as 'Farmajo,' to the presidency on February 8, 2017. Despite accusations of vote-buying and corruption in the run-up to the polls,⁵⁴ the election was marked by the peaceful transfer of power to President Mohamed, who holds dual US-Somali citizenship.⁵⁵ Despite praise by some analysts for Mohamed's previous experience in the Barre regime, the new Somali government has had difficulty in establishing legitimacy in the country and remains vulnerable to attacks by al-Shabaab.⁵⁶ On October 14, 2017, al-Shabaab was blamed for a double truck-bombing that killed an unprecedented 512 civilians, highlighting the limitations of the Somali Federal Government and its international allies in countering Islamist terror groups on its soil.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Official Somali policy toward Islamism is muddled, compromised by the complicity of the government in Islamist thought and activity. While Somali Islamism was damaged by the military defeat dealt to the Islamic Courts Union following the Ethiopian military intervention in late 2006 and early 2007, the chaos into which the Somali territories (outside Somaliland) subsequently sunk under the aegis of the TFG served to revive their standing, especially given some of the historical linkages between Islamism and pan-Somali yearning.⁵⁷ Consequently, Islamists will continue to be a competitive force among the Somalis.

In March 2009, a unity government was established between the TFG and elements of the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS). The expansion of the number of seats in the country's parliament to 550, and the election of former ICU leader Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as president, demonstrated the inclusion of a broader spectrum of Islamic ideology in government.⁵⁸ The election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed to the presidency of the Federal Government of Somalia in September 2012 and February 2017, respectively, has been seen as a further movement towards more moderate, albeit mildly Islamist, leadership.⁵⁹ Though Mohamud's tenure was characterized by a slow improvement in the security situation in the country, events under the Mohamed administration prove that extremist elements in Somalia continue to influence and threaten political order. This situation is exacerbated by the withdrawal of AMISOM forces (due to the respective domestic security needs of contributing countries) and a decrease in international support for their deployment in Somalia, which provide a potentially dangerous opening for the militant Islamists.

At the same time, two further topics require elucidation in the context of governmental response:

The Question of Somaliland

Although the sovereignty it reasserted has yet to be formally recognized by any other state, more than a decade and a half have passed since Somaliland (the north-western region of the former Somalia,

bordering on Ethiopia and Djibouti) proclaimed the dissolution of its voluntary union with the central government. Perhaps most important, in the context of the rising tide of Islamist militancy in southern and central Somalia, is the fact that Somaliland's reliance on the older system of clan elders and the respect they command "has served as something of a mediating force in managing pragmatic interaction between custom and tradition; Islam and the secular realm of modern nationalism," leading to a unique situation where "Islam may be pre-empting and/or containing Islamism."⁶⁰ The consequence of having an organic relationship between Somali culture and tradition and Islam appears to assure a stabilizing, rather than disruptive, role for religion in society in general, and religion and politics in particular. In Somaliland, for example, the population is almost exclusively Sunni Muslim and the shahada, the Muslim profession of the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's final prophet, is emblazoned on the flag; yet sharia is only one of the three sources of the jurisprudence in the region's courts, alongside secular legislation and Somali traditional law. Unlike the rest of the Somali lands, the region is governed by a democratic constitution which was approved by 97 percent of the voters in a May 2001 referendum and which provides for an executive branch of government, consisting of a directly elected president and vice president and appointed ministers; a bicameral legislature consisting of an elected House of Representatives and an upper chamber of elders, the guurti; and an independent judiciary. Somaliland has held presidential elections in 2003 and 2010 and parliamentary elections in 2005, all three of which were judged "free and fair" by international observers. Initially postponed due to drought, Somaliland held its most recent presidential elections on November 13, 2017, in which the incumbent Ahmed Mohamed Mahamoud did not seek a second term. In a poll which the international community claimed "preserved the integrity of the electoral process,"⁶¹ Mahamoud's successor in the Peace, Unity, and Development Party (KULMIYE), Muse Bihi Abdi, was elected president with 55 percent of the vote."

Not surprisingly, the relative success of Somaliland has drawn the ire of Islamists in southern and central Somalia. In 2008, on the same day that Shirwa Ahmed, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Minneapolis, Minnesota, blew himself up in an attack on the headquarters of the Puntland Intelligence Service in Bosaso, other suicide bombers from al-Shabaab hit the presidential palace, the UN Development Programme office, and the Ethiopian diplomatic mission in the Somaliland capital of Hargeisa.⁶²

Since suffering defeats in south and central Somalia, al-Shabaab fighters have established footholds in Puntland, posing a major threat to the region's governing institutions and its overall stability.⁶³ In the past, semi-autonomous Puntland has criticized Somaliland for ignoring the threat posed by the spread of al-Shabaab militants in northern Somalia.⁶⁴ However, a number of developments—including the effective use of a small coast guard to keep Somaliland largely free of piracy, as well as the 2009 transfer of two Guantanamo Bay detainees to Hargeisa, rather than the less secure Mogadishu—indicate that Somaliland is seen as less vulnerable to militant Islam than south and central Somalia.⁶⁵ In February 2013, authorities there responded more forcefully to al-Shabaab militants by arresting approximately eighty members, including the son of a Somaliland politician.⁶⁶

Islamism and Piracy

Although incidents of piracy have dramatically decreased since 2012, there was no evidence of anything other than opportunistic instances of cooperation between Somalia's Islamists and pirates. In early 2011, it was reported that al-Shabaab had reached a deal with one of the larger piracy syndicates for a 20 percent cut of all future ransoms from piracy and was even opening an office to specifically liaise with the pirates in the port of Xarardheere where the Islamist group would permit the hijackers to anchor seized ships while awaiting ransom payments.⁶⁷ A 2011 U.S. Congressional Research Service report cites testimony suggesting that Somali pirates were not directly allied with al-Shabaab, but did maintain many of these mutually beneficial financial arrangements.⁶⁸

Thanks to the adoption of best practices in maritime security and increased international patrols, piracy in the Gulf of Aden has declined significantly since 2012. Moreover, al-Shabaab's loss of control of

key ports including Xarardheere, Marka, Baraawe, and Kismaayo, to the Somali military and AMISOM further limit opportunities for cooperation between the Islamists and piracy networks.

ENDNOTES

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