

American Foreign Policy Council

SOMALIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 10,112,453

Area: 637,657 sq km

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

Religions: Sunni Muslim

Government Type: No permanent
national government; transitional,
parliamentary federal government

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$2.763 billion (2009 est.)



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)

The U.S. State Department's 2009 report on global terrorism trends summarized the threats emanating from Somalia by declaring that the failed state "remained highly unstable, and a permissive environment for terrorist transit and training," citing the fact that "the fragile hold on power of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), a protracted state of violent instability, long unguarded coasts, porous borders, and proximity to the Arabian Peninsula, made Somalia an attractive location for international terrorists seeking a transit or launching point for operations there or elsewhere." Specifically, the report noted that "the terrorist and insurgent groups al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam continued to exercise control over much of southern Somalia," while "the TFG and peacekeepers of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) were

confined to parts of Mogadishu.” Hampering the U.S. response to this threat is not only the absence of a viable 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.²

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Islamist groups currently active in Somalia fall roughly into one of seven principal categories:

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 Re-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 *jihadi* 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 remains an effective fighting force overall. It has 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 that it found “guilty” of alleged adultery.³ The current senior leadership of al-Shabaab appears to be made up of veteran *jihadists* with experience on battlefields abroad, including in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kashmir.⁴

Over time, the group has shifted its emphasis from a purely local focus on driving out foreign forces to an increasingly international agenda—one evidenced by a twin bombing in Kampala,

Uganda, in July 2010, during the FIFA World Cup final match, which left 74 people dead and scores injured, as well as by the organization's formal proclamations of its allegiance to al-Qaeda.

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 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. By and large, however, 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. There have been reports of talks, allegedly mediated by foreign militants, between the two Islamist groups aimed at bringing about their merger.⁵ Subsequently, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the two groups cooperated on a joint offensive against TFG and AMISOM forces in Mogadishu.

Mu'askar Ras Kamboni ("Ras Kamboni Brigades")

Led by Hassan Abdullah Hersi ("al-Turki"), a former military commander for the Islamic Courts, and 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 Ras Kamboni Brigades were aligned with Hizbul Islam until the beginning of 2010, when it announced it was joining forces with al-Shabaab and the two groups proclaimed their adhesion to "the international *jihad* of al-Qaeda."

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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.⁷ 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 managed in a number of places to stop what, just a few months prior, 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 is emerging as a force in southern and central Somalia. However, the group's opposition to al-Shabaab should not be confused for support of the TFG. In fact, the group's formal alliance with the TFG, 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 global strategic vision of al-Shabaab, the group has an Islamist agenda of its own. For example, it has conducted operations against those who it felt were not properly observing the fast of Ramadan—a practice that may set it at odds with the more secular elements of Somali society.⁸

Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia

The current iteration of the TFG, the fifteenth interim authority since the fall of Muhammad Siyad Barre in 1991, must be classified as an Islamist entity given the presidency of Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, former titular head of the Islamic Courts Union.⁹ "Though professing moderation," *The Economist* has written of Ahmed, "he promotes a version of *sharia* whereby every citizen of Somalia is born a Muslim and anyone who converts to another religion is guilty of apostasy, which is punishable by death."¹⁰ The International Crisis Group, which is usually not given to rhetorical excess, recently excoriated the TFG for "having squandered the support and goodwill it received and achieved little of significance," while "every effort to make the administration modestly functional has become unstuck."¹¹

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

Largely displaced during the period when the Islamic Courts Union was ascendant, al-Islah is undergoing something of a revival in Mogadishu since the return of Sharif Ahmed at the head of the TFG. Currently, its chief role is the administration of schools in the capitol which are 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.”¹²

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 in itself and as a jumping-off point for terrorist activities in the nearby Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere in Africa.¹³ An audio statement released by Osama bin Laden in praise of the Islamist insurgency in Somalia and calling upon Muslims to support it underscored this reality.¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ 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.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Somali identity is historically rooted in patrilineal descent (*abtir-siinyo*, or the “reckoning of ancestors”), which determines each individual’s exact place in society. At the apex of this structure are the five “clan-families”: Darod, Dir, Hawiye, Isaq, and Digil/Rah-

anweyn (also known as Digil Mirifle). The first four are considered “noble clans,” while the agro-pastoral Digil/Rahanweyn occupy a second tier in Somali society. A third tier also exists in Somali social hierarchy, consisting of minority clans whose members historically carried out occupations such as metalworking and tanning which, in the eyes of the nomadic “noble clans,” rendered them ritually unclean.¹⁶

Traditionally, the Somali subscribe to Sunni Islam and follow the Shāfi‘ī school (*mahdab*) of jurisprudence which, although conservative, is open to a variety of liberal views regarding practice.¹⁷ Up until the time of Somalia’s independence in 1960, although there were different movements within the Sunni Islam in Somalia, the most dominant were the Sufi brotherhoods (sing., *tariqa*, pl. *turuq*), especially that of the Qadiriyya order (although the Ahmadiyya order, introduced into Somali lands in the 19th century, was also influential).¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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,²⁰ 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-Mus-*

limoon). 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.²¹

The collapse in January 1991 of the Siyad Barre regime led to internecine warfare that laid waste to Somalia. Ironically, AIAI found itself in conflict with Muhammad Farah ‘Aideed, the warlord who would become America’s Somali *bête noire*, and, after being defeated by him, was forced to withdraw after heavy fighting. This withdrawal, which coincided with the fall of the Derg in neighboring Ethiopia, allowed the Somali Islamists to regroup in the Somali region of Ethiopia where there were also large numbers of refugees from Somalia proper. After the evacuation of Mogadishu, 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, including the bombing of two hotels and the 1995 attempted assassination of an ethnic Somali Ethiopian cabinet minister, Abdul Majeed Hussein, in Addis Ababa. 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.

Ironically, beginning in 1993, international interventions in Somalia unwittingly allowed the Islamists back into areas from which they had been ejected by 'Aideed, where they proceeded to thrive politically and commercially. Following the departure of the second United Nations mission in Somalia (UNOSOM II), Islamic authorities cropped up in response to problems of crime, *sharia* being a common denominator around which different communities could organize.

From its inception, 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 more subtle and seductive approach based on the establishment of economic and other social programs together with Islamic courts.²²

Islam has come to be seen by some Somalis as an alternative to both

the traditional clan-based identities and the emergent criminal syndicates led by so-called “warlords.” Religion’s increased influence 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 was 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.²³

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 intervened 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 1991.²⁴ 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 2008²⁵ and a “listed terrorist organization” by the Australian government the following year.²⁶ 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), which was 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,²⁷ 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 be still controlled by the beleaguered regime.²⁸

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

The Somali governmental policy toward Islamism is muddled, compromised by the complicity of the current TFG in Islamist thought and activity. As a result of the base of support which it enjoys by reason of the circumstances of its birth, 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) have subsequently sunk under the aegis of the TFG has served to revive their standing.²⁹ Consequently the Islamists will continue to be a competitive force among the Somalis. Indeed, as two seasoned observers have noted:

Whatever the short-term future holds, the complex social forces behind the rise of the Islamic Courts will not go away. Indeed while warlords and secular governments have come and gone, the Islamic Courts have enjoyed relatively consistent support for over a decade. They have tended to garner support when the populace is fed up with insecurity and ineffectual and corrupt politicians. For these reasons alone, as well as the likely long-term failure of the Transitional Federal Government's reliance on foreign protection and unwillingness to reconcile with armed opponents, the forces behind the Islamic Courts—in one form or another—are likely to rise again.³⁰

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 com-

mand “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.”³¹ 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 approved by 97 percent of the voters in a May 2001 referendum 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.

Not surprisingly, the relative success of Somaliland has drawn the ire of the 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.³²

Islamism and Piracy

While there is as yet no evidence of anything other than opportunistic instances of cooperation between Somalia’s Islamists and pirates—the latter having played no small role in the ferrying of non-Somali *jihadists* into the country—the ongoing ascendancy of al-Shabaab and its allies does not bode well for efforts to stem the

contemporaneous rise of the pirates.³³

In this context, it might be useful to refute the canard that when the Islamic Courts Union briefly held power in Mogadishu in the second half of 2006, the Islamist regime actively fought piracy. There is only one instance where the Islamist forces did anything that could even remotely be characterized as a counter-piracy operation. On November 8, 2006, Islamic Courts Union militia stormed the United Arab Emirates-registered cargo ship MV Veesham I, which had been hijacked off Adale, north of Mogadishu on the Somali coast, and arrested its captors. The operation, however, had less to do with any principled opposition to piracy and more to do with the fact that the owner of the Veesham was one of the key financial backers of the Islamist movement and that his contribution to its coffers would be affected if he lost his vessel and cargo to the 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.³⁴

ENDNOTES

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