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Somalia: State Failure, Poverty and Terrorism

Zakaria Ousman Ramadane

Bad governance, weak leadership, manmade and natural disasters and terrorism have crippled Somalia's economy and political and social institutions, and made the country one of the most conflict-ridden and underdeveloped in Africa. The vast ungoverned territories continue to be exploited by terrorists and criminal elements. Given Somalia's governance deficiencies, the only sustainable way to deal with the Al Shabaab threat is a strategy based on regional and international cooperation.

In the recent years, Africa has been witnessing a number of violent intra-state conflicts leading to the diversion of a significant portion of resources, including official funds earmarked for development, to emergency assistance to cope with the consequences of these conflicts. The Sahel in the West and the Horn of Africa in the East are the two hotspots of conflict in Africa, which are crippled by sectarian violence, drug-trafficking and terrorism. The two regions also suffer from environmental degradation.

Although the violent extremist Islamist groups operating in the Horn of Africa espouse a Salafi-Wahabist Islamic narrative, Sufism is the predominant form of Islam traditionally practiced in the region, which includes Eritrea, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and Kenya. The main Sufi Orders in Somalia are Qadiriyya, Ahmadiyya, Dandarawiyya and Salihyya. Although Salafism entered the region by 1960, the growth of the radical Salafi-Wahabist Islam and the subsequent spread of extremist jihadist ideologies in East Africa have come about in the recent decades.

State Failure and Terrorism in Somalia

The factors contributing to the emergence of religious extremism in the Horn of Africa are mainly political and socio-economic. One of the major socioeconomic factors has been the imposition of Structural Adjustment

Programs (SAPs) on governments in East Africa, which were initiated by the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and the International Monetary fund) in the 1980s. The East African governments were compelled to make drastic budgetary cuts, as one of the goals of the SAPs was to make a general saving by cutting government spending. According to some assessments, however, these macroeconomic reforms resulted in emasculating state capacities and provided a windfall of opportunities for political movements (mostly Islamist) to take root, as public spending for delivery of essential services such as education, health, electricity, water and security decreased substantially and were confined to the urban middleclass and elite areas. Income distribution also polarised due to the structural adjustment, as many individuals formerly employed in the state sector lost their jobs. For example, in Somalia, the government was unable to employ university graduates to sectors such as education and healthcare, which were formerly administered by the state, which caused almost all schools and medical facilities to shut down.

By and large, the Somalian political leadership, like that of its counterparts in many East African countries, also failed to meet people's expectations for socio-economic development. Indeed, the corruption and embezzlement of public funds by the political leadership of Somalia increased simultaneously with the spread of poverty, unemployment and tribalism (inter-tribal conflict). By the late 1980s, the government of Somalia could no longer fulfill its core function of providing basic public services to the population, the state had become irrelevant to people's lives and various extremist and rebel groups began to exploit segments of the population and challenge the central government.

The civil wars in Somalia in the 1990s, which followed the fall of former president Mohammed Siad Barre, culminated in a virtual 'state collapse' exposing the country to violence and instability. As a result, Somalia underwent tremendous structural political transformations: in northern Somalia, the self-declared Republic of Somaliland came into being, which was formed by the Somali National Movement (founded and led by members of the Isaaq clan of the Somaliland region), which also included the semi-autonomous region of Puntland.

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In Somalia, even with the unprecedented inflow of foreign aid and troops, state collapse has created vast ungoverned spaces which are in the hands of terrorist movements and criminal groups. The central government of Somalia presently has control only over Mogadishu and key towns in south-central Somalia, while the jihadist and other secessionist groups control all other parts of the country.

The destabilising effect of militant Islam and political conflict in Somalia is exacerbated also due to pervasive poverty and environmental degradation. During the last fifty years, the Horn of Africa has experienced four cyclical droughts, resulting in famines, environment degradation and the displacement of people and animals. In Somalia, 70 percent of the people depend directly or indirectly on a subsistence economy. The system of agricultural production and animal rearing based on a subsistence economy has not been able to cope with the high population growth (3 percent annually), and the population has been devastated by frequent floods and droughts leading to desertification and the destruction of harvests. The demographic map of the country has in fact permanently shifted due to the displacement of a large portion of the Somali population to the south, with concentrations in IDP camps. Life in camps has altered traditional family structures and undermined social cohesion. Significantly, camp populations which are mainly comprised of young males – an economically vulnerable segment of the population – have become an easy prey to terrorist recruiters.

Evolving Terrorist Network

According to an estimate of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) of the University of Maryland, Al Shabaab Al Mujahideen, the most significant terrorist group in Somalia, has carried out approximately 550 terrorist attacks (mostly within Somalia but also outside of it, notably in Kenya and Uganda), killing more than 1,600 and injuring more than 2,100 individuals, since its inception in 2007. It is estimated that Al Shabaab has 1,000 to 4,000 fighters of which 200 to 400 are foreigners (from Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sudan, Kenya, the United States and other African states). The primary objective of Al Shabaab, an Al Qaeda affiliated organisation, is to establish an Islamic state (caliphate) and topple the internationally recognised Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG), which is administered from Mogadishu. Al Shabaab is associated with the strict Salafi-Wahabist doctrine of Islam which calls for governance according to Sharia (Islamic) Law. The group also calls for a cultural revival and revitalisation of Islam among the population. Al Shabaab is currently in control of southern and central Somalia and has established Al Shabaab branches and Islamist administrations throughout these territories, each running a mosque, a school and a youth club. While Al Shabaab is the major jihadist group in Somalia, Hizb al Islamare is equally violent. The Hizb al Islam, which separated from Al Shabaab in 2012, controls Beledweyne and administers the Hiraan region, as well as Afgoi district near Mogadishu. Hizb al Islam is presently not believed to be affiliated to Al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda's connection with Somali jihadist operations started from 2008 with individuals associated with Al Qaeda from the Middle East and Asia participating in Al Shabaab attacks, as well as in the illicit trade of charcoal out of Somalia to neighbouring countries and the Middle East. The involvement in illicit trade not only generated money to support Al Shabaab's activities but also furnished Al Qaeda access to the booming illegal arms market in the region as reported by Radio France International (RFI) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

The organisational structure of Al Shabaab is important to understand how the group operates. It is known that the leaders of Al Shabaab operate with a Shura Council (Islamic advisory council) which sets the agenda for the group, i.e. to establish an Islamist state and apply Islamic law as a code of conduct for Muslims throughout

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Somalia. While Al Shabaab's founder-leader Ahmed Abdi Godane (a.k.a Abu Mukhtar Abu Zubair) along with other leaders such as Ibrahim Haji Jama al Afghani, Mukhtar 'Abu Mansur' Robow, Fu'ad Muhammad Khalaf 'Shongole' (Al Shabaab's spokesman), 'Ali Mahamoud Rage' and preacher 'Abd al Qadir Mu'min' were likely to have been a part of the Shura Council, its present membership is not known.

Al Shabaab's operating structure is based on networks of a number of small cells (nodes), where some (hubs) provide centralised direction and communication linkages to others that are decentralised and are many in number (while some cells may operate entirely independently from hubs). Hubs channel financial aid and guidance to the nodes without asserting active control or direction. Nodes identify targets and initiate terrorist operations largely independent of the hubs, but making use of the hub's resources and assistance. While the ties between hubs and nodes are weak, ties within the node itself are very strong and quite resistant to erosion. Consequently, nodes have been extremely difficult to penetrate, monitor or detect. The terrorist activities of Al Shabaab have thus largely been carried out by these small local groups of individuals who receive instructions from the Shura Council (generally) via the hubs, but have the operational capability to carry out attacks on their own.

There is an indication that Al Shabaab may be looking to work with other jihadist groups in the region. It is reported that a Boko Haram fighter from Nigeria went to Somalia and allegedly received training from Al Shabaab. The return of the Boko Haram fighter from Somalia to Nigeria coincided with the August 2011 bombing of the UN compound in Abuja. However, it seems that a partnership between Boko Haram and Al Shabaab would be difficult to sustain due to the geographical distance between the groups (Boko Haram operating from northern Nigeria in the north-west of Africa and Al Shabaab based in Somalia in the north-east of the continent). But the tie between Al Shabaab and Al Hijra in Kenya could be developed due to the long land and sea borders, and due to the presence of the large and ancient community of persons of Somali origin in Kenya. In fact, Kenyan Muslims have been recruited by Al Shabaab and Al Shabaab used the Somali-dominated Eastleigh district of Nairobi to plan the Westgate Mall attack in 2013.

Despite the heavy presence of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) since 2007 in Somalia to support the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia to maintain peace and stability (AMISOM's chief mandate being to consolidate peace and stability in Somalia by helping the new government to contain, repulse attacks and work towards defeating Al Shabaab), the scope of Al Shabaab's terrorist activities continue to deepen inside the country as well as outside of Somalia not only in numbers but in terms of networking and expansion of the illegal arms trade with actors from other conflict zones in close proximity, such as South Sudan.

The Way Ahead

The general lawlessness in Somalia and the transnational nature of the terrorist and criminal networks in the Horn of Africa, call for a concerted regional effort to effectively respond to the threats. Better integration of national, regional and international instruments based on the shared goals of greater security as well as development will result in more comprehensive and long-term solutions, that can not only defeat terrorism, but prevent it by strengthening respective national governments and countering radicalisation and promoting socio-economic development regionally. Such an effort involves improved communication and collaboration between the countries of the region, key donors and multilateral bodies. In formulating a regional security policy, synergy based on pooling resources and knowledge on violent extremist groups must be achieved, along with the ownership and coordination of medium and long-term joint military actions as required. Indeed, the situation in Somalia may constitute a prime opportunity for East African states to come together as a regional community to combat the menace of terrorism and the related criminal domain.

Zakaria Ousman Ramadane is the President, Centre for Peace, Security and Sustainable Development in Chad. He is also a Member of the Board of the African Federation for Strategic Studies based in Morocco. He worked in the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) in Mogadishu, Somalia from 1988 to 1991.