

Somalia: US policy shift towards Islamists after Ethiopian pullout

By Brian Smith
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Last month Somali MPs elected Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, leader of the Djibouti-based Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS), as the country's new president. Sharif was previously chairman of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which briefly ruled Somalia in 2006 before the United States-backed Ethiopian invasion forced the UIC into exile in Eritrea.

Ethiopia began pulling out troops in 2008, having succeeded in uniting Somalia's various Islamic and clan-based militias against it. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi complained that the West had not given Ethiopia enough political and financial support. Washington had backed the stooge Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of warlords, which recently collapsed following the Ethiopian withdrawal.

After Ethiopia withdrew, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), comprising around 3,400 Ugandan and Burundian troops, remained in Mogadishu, though Uganda is considering pulling out citing lack of money, equipment and troops.

Whilst the new Obama administration has made no official comment on Sharif's election, the US embassy in Kenya issued a statement welcoming it, which is something of a policy turnaround with Washington having previously denounced the UIC as an affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Other western governments have also been supportive of Sharif and his new government.

Sharif for his part has welcomed the coming to power of Barack Obama and glossed over the brutal actions of the US/Ethiopian intervention.

Early in 2008 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) facilitated talks in Djibouti that sought to bring the "moderate" elements of the ARS opposition into negotiations with the rump TFG and Ethiopia. This split the ARS into two factions: ARS-Djibouti, led by Sharif, which took part in the talks and agreed to a ceasefire; and ARS-Asmara, led by Sheikh Hassan Dahir 'Aweys', which called for Sharif's expulsion and refused to negotiate with foreign elements whilst Ethiopia remained in the country.

In June 2008 Sharif's faction and the TFG signed an accord in Djibouti on the cessation of hostilities, Ethiopia's withdrawal, plans for a government of national unity, and the establishment of a 10,000-strong national security force comprising both ARS and government troops.

The Djibouti Agreement set out that the new parliament would be comprised of 550 seats, up from 275, with the new MPs being drawn primarily from the ARS-Djibouti faction. Consequently 149 new opposition members from the ARS were sworn in to parliament just before the recent presidential election, which was subsequently won by Sharif.

The US now tacitly welcomes an Islamist government that is not markedly different from the one that the US/Ethiopian invasion of Somalia helped to overthrow, with so much loss of life from the subsequent violence and chaos. An estimated 1.2 million Somalis have fled their homes, and 16,000 civilians have been killed in the ensuing Iraq-style insurgency that plunged the country into chaos, where warlords and pirates flourished.

Human Rights Watch has issued an open letter to the African Union (AU) Commission Chairman Jean Ping that says the policies of many governments had been destructive in Somalia, and calls for the UNSC to initiate a commission of inquiry into human rights abuses.

"US policy on Somalia has been particularly unhelpful, treating Somalia's complex realities as a theatre in the 'war on terror' while turning a blind eye to rampant abuses by the Ethiopian and transitional government forces," HRW explained.

The letter follows a report in May 2008 in which Amnesty International accused the Ethiopian troops in Somalia of increasingly gruesome methods that include rape, torture and throat-slitting executions.

Somalia is one of the three poorest countries in the world, with a budget almost entirely dependent on foreign aid, and is characterized by chronically high rates of acute malnutrition. UNICEF estimates that 3.2 million Somalis (around 43 percent of the country's population) including 1.4

million children are in need of emergency livelihood and life saving assistance. Approximately 330,000 Somali children are expected to be acutely malnourished over the course of 2009, with 96,000 severely so. This is a 77 percent increase since January 2008.

Although Ethiopia formally welcomed Sharif's election, on the day after he was sworn in it launched an incursion into Somalia intending to show that it still holds some control. Prime Minister Zenawi told *Africa Confidential*, "If the Al Shabaab [Islamic militia] got control of Somalia, we would go in and remove them again. That's non-negotiable."

He also warned that if they did return it would not be to protect the AU Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops, but rather that Ethiopian units would track down "terrorist" groups, reprising a role it played in the late 1990s when it pursued an Islamic militia in support of US interests.

Al Shabaab was initially the youth wing of the UIC, though, unlike those who relocated to Eritrea, its members largely remained in Somalia following the Ethiopian intervention and began a successful guerrilla war against the Ethiopian and TFG troops. It slowly gained control of huge swathes of the country, including the southern port of Kismayo, and with its allies took control of the recently abandoned Ethiopian bases and the seat of government in Baidoa.

Al Shabaab promotes an ultra-conservative form of Sunni Islam and is listed as a terrorist organization by the US. Like the ARS-Asmara faction, with whom it maintained links, it is bitterly opposed to the Djibouti Agreement.

The election of Sharif, who is widely regarded as a religious figure, coupled with the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops, which removed a rallying point, has shaken up the political landscape in Somalia and at least temporarily undermined groups such as Al Shabaab.

Al Shabaab has begun to divide into smaller, clan or sub-clan units of a few dozen fighters and faces serious competition from other Islamist groups, both oppositional and pro-government. There have been reports of sporadic conflict breaking out.

US interventions going back over decades have first whipped up clan divisions and now threaten to sink the country into a factional religious war.

Al Shabaab had previously upset some Islamist groups when some of its members destroyed the tombs of Sufi saints in the Kismayo area. This provoked popular hostility and mobilised several militias, loosely organised in the Ahlu Sunna wal Jama'a confederation, to which the departing Ethiopian troops allegedly provided weapons and ammunition.

Some oppositional Islamists, including a number of ex-Al Shabaab units, have regrouped under a new umbrella,

Hizbul Islam (Party of Islam), led by Omar Imam Abubaker, who was deputy chairman to Aweys in the UIC parliament in 2006. If Hizbul Islam survives it could become a rallying point for those disgruntled with Sharif.

Sharif announced that he has agreed to proposals for a truce with some insurgent groups. However, Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab have rejected the ceasefire offer and will continue to battle AMISOM troops until they leave the country. Sharif has now announced that the government will make Sharia law the basis of the country's legal system. Whilst this is designed to undermine the increasingly divided Islamic insurgency, Sharif was at pains to point out that he won't agree to a strict interpretation of Sharia, and that it would still allow women to serve in parliament. The Ministry of Justice would also continue to select judges, and police would still have the power to detain suspects and carry out sentences.

"They have no option but to accept peace," Sharif said somewhat hopefully, though he has set about shoring up military alliances in the event the insurgents do not back down.

If Somali reconciliation fails, there will again be growing calls from the Western powers for military intervention. The African Union has been lobbying for AMISOM to be strengthened and for increased Western backing, a demand repeated by Somali Foreign Minister Mohamed Abdulahi Oomar at the Security Council last week.

However, the foreign minister's call was opposed by members of Sharif's Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia, as well as by clan elders and a powerful group of clerics called the Somali Islamic Scholars Association that backs the new government. They have called for AMISOM to be withdrawn, fearing that its continued presence will rally support for Al Shabaab and other militias. For the time being Western governments have put calls for a possible UN intervention on hold, with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reporting to the Security Council that there are "uncertainties" about such a force being the right tool to support the new government.

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