

The Royal College of Defence Studies



RCDS 2008 – CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC ISSUES

How Serious A Threat Are Islamic Extremist Groups In East Africa/Horn Of Africa, And To Whom? What Is The Best Strategy For Outsiders Who Want To Reduce The Threat?

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Key Judgements

- Islamic terrorism in the Horn of Africa presents a significant threat to the West, particularly USA and Israeli interests, and African countries considered sympathetic to the West, such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania.
- Indigenous support for Islamic terrorism in the Horn of Africa is a reflection more of the prevalent political, economic and social conditions rather than a result of deep-rooted religious ideology.
- The international response must be appropriate to the region and create a firm foundation for its future. Rather than focus solely on eliminating the immediate terrorist threat, a balanced response is needed to address the region's fundamental problems of poverty, inequality, ethnic and inter-state rivalry, and weak governance.
- Stability in Somalia is crucial to the reduction of the threat
- The success of the AMISOM mission is vital for establishing the credibility of both the AU and the International Community in countering terrorism in the region.

Discussion

Nature of the Threat

The Horn of Africa is viewed as a region of strategic importance by Al Qaeda, which has proven ability to operate in the area. In particular, Somalia represents the icon of US peacekeeping failure in the 1990s, which has acted as a brake on subsequent Western engagement on the ground in Africa.

The widespread availability of arms, porous international borders and inadequate maritime security in the region create a fertile breeding ground for terrorism. Enduring sympathies for militant Islam persist whilst abject poverty, poor governance, pervasive corruption and lack of central authority make the region attractive to terrorist organisations. Efforts to bring stability to Somalia have failed repeatedly and nearly half of all Somalis rely on aid just to survive. The long-term conflicts within Sudan create additional destabilizing regional pressures.

The region has provided an important staging area for terrorism both in Africa and elsewhere in the world. In 1998, the US Embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi were bombed whilst, in 2002 in Mombassa, an Israeli-owned hotel was bombed and surface-to-air missiles were fired at an Israeli passenger aircraft. All 4 men convicted for the failed bomb attacks in London on 21 July 2005 originated from the Horn. The US Government designated the Horn of Africa as a 'front-line region' in its '*Global War on Terrorism*' and deployed the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF-Horn of Africa) to Djibouti in 2002/03. UK Counter

Terrorist officials rank, after Pakistan, the Horn of Africa alongside the Middle East as its area of greatest concern.

Somalia has been without an effective central government since President Barre was overthrown in 1991. Years of fighting between rival warlords and an inability to deal with famine and disease led to the deaths of up to one million people. Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a bitter war from 1998 - 2000 and their fierce enmity still dominates their foreign and security policy and has continued to be played out through proxies in Somalia. Following the seizure of power by the Union of Islamic Courts in December 2006, the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) invaded Somalia and restored the Transitional Federal Government to power.

Reduction of the Threat

To reduce the threat from terrorism, a comprehensive and coherent international strategic response is needed for the region that embraces:

- A broad strategy that encompasses political, economic and social development as well as addressing the security situation.
- Recognition that Islamic militancy in the Horn of Africa provides a rallying point rather than a unique cause in its own right. Political will and long-term commitment are needed to promote trust and address the region's fundamental problems, namely extreme poverty, inequality, unemployment, ethnic and inter-state rivalry, and weak governance.
- Recognition that the insertion of the logic and rhetoric of the '*Global War on Terrorism*' into the complex web of regional conflict in the Horn has polarised the parties along religious lines, making it harder for outsiders to mediate and maintain a balanced approach.
- An appreciation of the importance of the region's history and recognition that many of the protagonists view the contemporary conflicts as part of a protracted continuum of warfare. More effort is needed to understand and respect public opinion and to win local hearts and minds. Patience and modest goals are required as the region has a long history of resistance to outside interference.
- A strong diplomatic approach that promotes African engagement and ensures that the wider international community underpins the response with the financial, logistic and intelligence support needed to facilitate success.
- Even-handedness in dealing with the states of the region. For example, Western powers have chosen to support Ethiopia, which appears to represent their own national interests, at the expense of Somalia. However, proactive engagement with Somalia is needed as stability within the country is fundamental to the wider security of the region.
- Creation of a firm foundation for the future, ranging from a reliable and robust transport and communications infrastructure to the empowerment of the population through comprehensive and effective education and healthcare systems.

Progress to Date

The provision of stability in Somalia is central to the success of this strategy. HQ AMISOM confirmed that militant Islamic terrorism posed a direct threat in Somalia and reported an increase in the number of foreign fighters joining the insurgency. However, the international response to date has been woefully inadequate. Following the seizure of power by the Union of Islamic Courts, Ethiopia invaded Somalia in December 2006 to reinstate the Transitional Federal Government. In March 2007, the AU deployed AMISOM but it has only been able to establish fragile control over the Mogadishu sea and air ports. It lacks the capability to counter the insurgency by Al-Shabab and the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia and enforce peace within the city let alone across the rest of the country. AMISOM requires a force of at least 8000 personnel, including infantry, civilian police and coastal maritime and air support but, to date, only 2500 personnel have been deployed. In particular, the commitment of a lead nation is required, which to be accepted by the Somali people should be Islamic.

In August 2008, the UN brokered the Djibouti Agreement whereby the Ethiopian and AU forces would be replaced by UN peacekeepers. However, Al-Shabab has refused to recognise the agreement and, without peace, the UN is not prepared to deploy its troops. Transfer of responsibility to the UN is essential as the AU does not have the capability to sustain the operation. During our discussion with President Meles, he expressed his frustration at the failure of the international community to deploy sufficient forces to implement the Djibouti Agreement and indicated that he was prepared to withdraw the ENDF unilaterally. Whilst the threat of instability in Somalia may deter him from this course of action, his frustration highlights the urgent need for decisive action by the international community. Without commitment from the UN, the credibility of both the AU and the international community in countering terrorism in the region is effectively compromised.

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