

Will Somalia become the 4th front in the war against terror?

By Mike Clough | August 23, 2006

THE LAST TIME Somalia got Americans' attention was in October 1993, when U.S. Delta Force commandos and Army Rangers were dropped into its capital city, Mogadishu, to capture two aides of a Somali warlord. The mission was successful, but two Black Hawk helicopters were downed by Somali militia, and in the ensuing firefight, 18 Americans died. Images of an Army Ranger's body being dragged through the streets horrified U.S. households. Soon after, President Clinton abandoned the country, and Somalia was largely forgotten until the 2001 movie "Black Hawk Down" retold the tragic story. Now, Somalia is on the brink of becoming the fourth front in the U.S. war on terror. As in Afghanistan, Iraq and in Lebanon, the U.S. is allied in some way against radical Islamic fundamentalists.

The Islamic Courts Union, a growing alliance of Islamic militants, recently routed U.S.-backed warlords and took over Mogadishu. It seeks to oust a transitional federal government, which is supported by the African Union but controls only the town of Baidoa. On the sidelines is the U.S.-backed regime in Ethiopia that is eager to lead the battle against the Islamists, who may have ties to Al Qaeda. A war could quickly spread throughout the Horn of Africa and be as costly in human lives as the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict.

In many ways, this latest front in the war on terror is the culmination of nearly 30 years of alternating Washington policy blunders and neglect in the Horn of Africa. That history has left the U.S. with few good options in a worsening situation.

U.S. missteps in the region date to 1977, when policymakers tacitly - and foolishly - encouraged Somalia to take advantage of political instability in the Ethiopian capital and grab control of Ethiopia's Somali-inhabited Ogaden region.

The move backfired when Soviet and Cuban troops rushed in to defend the Marxist regime in Addis Ababa, turning Ethiopia into Moscow's staunchest ally in Africa. In response, Washington armed Mohamed Siad Barre's thugocracy in Somalia.

When the Cold War ended, U.S. policy toward Somalia swung from intense engagement to indifference. Aid was cut off, Barre was overthrown and the country began its descent into anarchy.

But in 1992, the New York Times published photographs of starving children in Baidoa, and President George H.W. Bush sent U.S. troops into Mogadishu under U.N. auspices to distribute food. It was a noble humanitarian gesture but ultimately misguided.

Most experts opposed American intervention in Somalia because they believed that the famine was nearing an end and that the presence of U.S. soldiers would only exacerbate the conflicts among rival clan warlords that stymied relief efforts.

They were right.

As fighting among Somalia's warlords intensified, the Clinton administration and the United Nations started to talk about nation-building. It was never clear which was prepared to restore order, but the mere possibility that the U.S. or the U.N. might try made them targets.

The Black Hawk incident abruptly ended talk of nation-building as a goal, and Somalia was forgotten again.

Meanwhile, Clinton had embraced the Ethiopian government of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi as the region's cop. Meles was seen as a tough-minded reformer who, along with other "new African leaders," would provide much-needed role models for a troubled continent. He also pledged to assist covert efforts to track down Al Qaeda cells operating in the region, which was especially important to Washington in the wake of the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

Thus were sown the seeds of the current conflict unfolding in the Horn of Africa. The chaos in Somalia, the result of years of on-again, off-again U.S. policy, allowed the Islamic militants to gain sway in a country where religion has traditionally been far less important than kinship. Clinton's embrace of Meles - and President George W. Bush's strengthening of ties with Ethiopia after 9/11 - encouraged the Ethiopian prime minister to believe that he could dictate Somalia's political future.

If Ethiopia, which has a large, moderate Islamic population, were a stable democracy committed to nurturing a democratic Somalia, the Clinton-Bush strategy would make sense. But it is not. As Human Rights Watch reported on the eve of parliamentary elections last year, the Meles regime crushed dissent in Oromia, a region overwhelmingly hostile to it, in order to maintain power. Since the election, many of the opposition leaders who won seats in Parliament are now in jail.

With a growing likelihood of war in the Horn of Africa, Bush has little maneuvering room. He could accept the emergence of an anti-American Islamist Somalia. He could back Ethiopian intervention on the side of the transition government in Baidoa, which would lead to a bloody war. Or he could try to persuade another African government to militarily support the transitional government.

None of these are particularly appealing, even when practical. This time, Somalia doesn't seem to be going away.

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